OLD!

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THE RETROBATES

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE XBOX 360 GAME?

DARRAN JONES

As much as I love *The Club*, it's Rare's brilliant *Viva Piñata* that I've put the most time into.
Expertise: Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls and an award-winning magazine, all under one roof!
Currently playing: *Dead By Daylight*
Favourite game of all time: *OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast*

TIM EMPEY

I've played so many games on the 360, especially when I was working on *360*. But *Bayonetta* immediately sprang into my head.
Expertise: Finishing Game Pass games before they go.
Currently playing: *The Outer Worlds 2*
Favourite game of all time: *God Hand*

NICK THORPE

Wow, what a tough choice. I actually don't own a copy of *Rock Band*, but it was the perfect game for living in a shared house as we could assemble a full band and have a blast together.
Expertise: Owning five Master Systems and a Mark III
Currently playing: *Mortal Kombat: Legacy Kollection*
Favourite game of all time: *Sonic The Hedgehog*

ANDY SALTER

I never really played much on the 360 apart from *Guitar Hero/Rock Band* at parties.
Expertise: Modding games, no 'vanilla' versions for me, thanks!
Currently modding: *RTR: Imperium Surrectum*
Favourite game of all time: *Rome: Total War* although I guess it's the *Remastered* edition now

PAUL ROSE

My favourite Xbox 360 game has to be *Mirror's Edge*!
Expertise: Winging it
Currently playing *Baldur's Gate III*
Favourite game of all time: *Half-Life 2*

GRAEME MASON

Gosh, that's a tricky one. I think I'll go with *Fallout 3*, simply for the amount of hours I put into it and the fact it's one of two 360 games where I maxed the Achievements. The other? *Fallout: New Vegas*.
Expertise: Adjusting the tape azimuth with a screwdriver
Currently playing: *Creepy Shift: Creepy Diner*
Favourite game of all time: *Resident Evil 4*

STUART HUNT

So many to choose from. I'll go for *Split/Second: Velocity* – a cracking underrated arcade racer with great tracks, stunning visuals, and some really fun mechanics.
Expertise: Games with flying bits in them
Currently playing: *Ninja Gaiden 4*
Favourite game of all time: *Donkey Kong*

ANDREW FISHER

Rock Band. I got my 360 when I was going through a tough time health-wise, and this was a great distraction.
Expertise: Forty years of gaming, from Commodore 64 to Switch
Currently playing: *Cosmo Knight Zion*
Favourite game of all time: *Wizball*

RORY MILNE

No matter the time I put into *Project Gotham Racing 3* I always get a kick out of playing it. I'll likely never own a supercar, but Bizarre's racer is the next best thing.
Expertise: The game that I'm currently writing about at the time of writing
Currently playing: *Cannon Fodder*
Favourite game of all time: *Tempest*

LOADING...

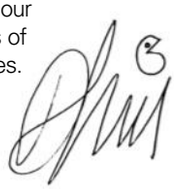
Seeing Microsoft's second console on the cover of our magazine will undoubtedly make some of you feel old. It certainly makes me feel old and it's mainly because I can link my first proper interactions with the machine to starting on **Retro Gamer**.

I was one of the few Imagine Publishing staff to buy the system on launch day, mainly because the *360* team were expecting to get consoles from Microsoft, so when that didn't happen, loads of promo games simply began appearing on my desk. By the end of the week I had access to the entire launch library.

The Xbox 360 is genuinely one of my favourite consoles and it has been a delight to revisit its launch and impact on the industry with veterans who worked on the system. Like Nick, I've also dug my console out and have been playing the likes of *After Burner: Climax* and the original *Red Dead Redemption* again.

Still, if the Xbox 360 is a little too new for you, there's plenty more to enjoy. We look at the history of *Terminator* games, go behind the scenes of *Pipe Mania*, *Stormbringer* and *Real Bout Fatal Fury 2: The Newcomers*, and revisit the excellent *Mega Man X*. There's plenty more to discover, including a great subs deal on page 34 and our calendar featuring 40 years of the *Super Mario Bros* series.

Stay safe and enjoy the magazine.



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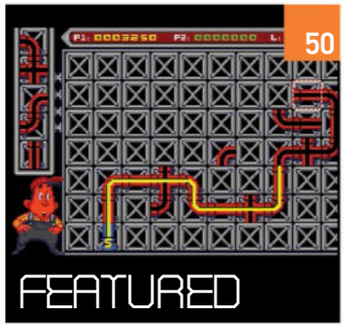

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SAVE UP TO 40% SUBSCRIPTION
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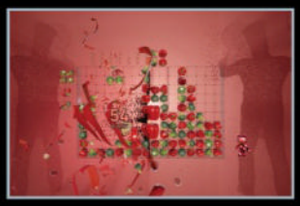

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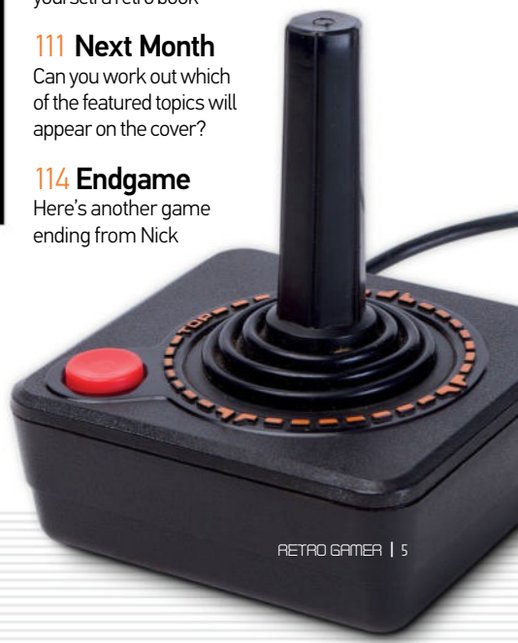

» [PC] The new 4K visuals look absolutely stunning, especially during the game's cutscenes.

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Many gamers found *Impossible Mission* tough, but not many decided to hack it

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BROKEN SWORD II REMASTER TAKES SHAPE

Charles Cecil talks us through Broken Sword: The Smoking Mirror Reforged

Words by Steve Boxer

Revolution Software has announced that it is working on a remaster of the second *Broken Sword* game, originally released in 1997. Entitled *Broken Sword: The Smoking Mirror Reforged*, it will be available on current-gen consoles, the PC, PS4, Xbox One and Switch, and is pencilled in for a spring 2026 release. It will follow 2024's remaster of the original game, *Broken Sword: Shadow Of The Templars Reforged*.

To find out more, we went straight to the horse's mouth: Revolution Software managing director and *Broken Sword* originator Charles Cecil. Charles acknowledges that remastering *Broken Sword II* is the logical move after giving the same treatment to the first game, "It all started with our community saying, 'Why are you not producing these games on the modern consoles?' I've always hung back, but it always struck me that it would be really great to up-rez them."

With *Broken Sword: Shadow Of The Templars Reforged*, Cecil thought of turning to AI to handle that up-rezzing process, but that turned out to be a blind alley, "For *Broken Sword II*, we just decided that rather than messing about, we would redraw all the animations by hand. Bearing in mind that for *Broken Sword II* there are 45,000 frames of animation, and each one takes an hour, this is a huge undertaking."

» Charles Cecil MBE established Revolution Software in 1990, creating five *Broken Sword* and two *Steel Sky* games, the latter with legendary comic-book artist Dave Gibbons.

So Revolution turned to outsourcing for the animation – as, Charles reveals, it did with the original game, "First time around, we used a company called Fil Cartoons in Manila. But Fil Cartoons went into receivership, and the whole industry there really declined quite significantly. Then, for the remake, we needed an outsourcer and I didn't know who to contact. I contacted the Philippine Animation Society and a company called Friendly Foes contacted us. They are using a lot of the animators that were trained back in the day. So it's really nice to think that some of the animators that animated the game 30 years ago are now back, animating the same, but digitally. It's fantastic, because 2D animation is a dying art – so much is done in 3D these days."

Famously, under pressure from then-publisher Virgin Interactive, Revolution Software had just a year in which to make *Broken Sword II: The Smoking Mirror*.

» [PC] This image will be familiar to anyone who played the original game.

» [PC] The *Reforged* version of the original *Broken Sword* is certainly worth playing.

Charles talks about some of the game's elements that he will be able to improve in the remaster now there's no particular rush on, "In *Broken Sword II*, we didn't put a map in – just icons. So our intention is to put the map back in – it's a minor thing, but it will make a big difference.

"Also, there's a pirate museum, called Ketch Museum, in which there's a book with a verse about treasure, and a rich man not being able to go through the eye of a needle," continues Charles. "The problem is that you don't need to go and look at that book. But in the next section, you are specifically trying to line up a needle which you can look through, and the treasure is on the other side. I would hazard a guess that the vast majority of people who played the game went through that section without any idea as to why they were looking through the eye of a needle. That's terrible, absolutely terrible.

"We actually backed the game up pretty effectively, which is extraordinary for 1997, so we have the original logic scripts which we can recompile, and we have the opportunity to update things like that. There's a line, though: we're not changing the game, we're just enhancing it. I'm happy to put all of these things in; we're just not going to add new content."

» [PC] We wonder if one of those maps is the one Charles intends to add to the game…

> "It's really nice to think that some of the animators that animated the game 30 years ago are now back"
>
> **CHARLES CECIL**

Charles confirms that, as in *Broken Sword: Shadow Of The Templars Reforged*, *Smoking Mirror Reforged* will have two play modes entitled Classic and Story. The latter is designed to be more forgiving, adding hints when players are stuck and removing some of the game's red herrings. Charles says, "Our big challenge is to make sure that the game not only appeals on a nostalgic level but that we appeal to a new audience as well."

Charles explains that when Revolution Software made a touch-screen version of the game, for iOS and Android, feedback from players unfamiliar with point-and-click adventure games was negative. "So we went on an epic quest, looking at why people were getting stuck and why they were getting frustrated. We worked really hard to identify when people were stuck through the gameplay patterns, and then to give them little hits and to just take away non-vital hot-spots."

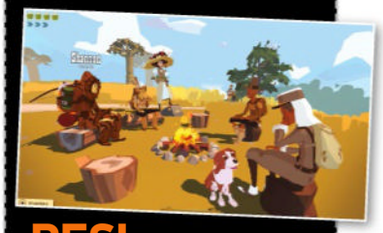
Charles confirms that, as with the remaster of the first game, Revolution Software will launch a Kickstarter for *Broken Sword: The Smoking Mirror Reforged*, "We just do it the old-fashioned way: we write games, and if we make a profit, we do more games, and if we don't, we stop." And what of the sixth instalment of the *Broken Sword* series? "It's in the pipeline, coming along very, very slowly."

Does he feel that it's miraculous that people still play point-and-click adventure games which, even 30 years ago, were seen as an archaic genre? "We get people coming up to York, on a sort of pilgrimage. They bring their children and they talk about the fact that they played with their parents, and now they are playing with their children. If I can live long enough to see a fourth generation of people playing *Broken Sword*, I'll be very proud."

» [PC] High definition allows the game's many characters to show all manner of dynamic expressions.

MOLYNEUX'S LAST GAME?

2cans proprietor and gaming legend Peter Molyneux has admitted that the game he is currently working on, *Masters Of Albion*, will be his last. Speaking to *Edge* magazine, he said, "I'm 66 years old. I'm working as hard as I've ever worked in my life. And I just haven't got the life energy left to do this again."



RESI REMAKES: 0 MOST LIKELY

Resident Evil fans have long felt that remakes of *Resident Evil 0* and *Code Veronica* are overdue. And it looks like they may be right as far as *Resident Evil 0* is concerned. Website MP1st is adamant that contacts at Capcom have confirmed that the company is working on a *Resident Evil 0 Remake*; the prequel originally only appeared on the GameCube, although it was eventually ported to the various more modern consoles.

Who is Mike Mika?
Mike Mika's official videogame career began in the Nineties, working on Game Boy Color titles like *Klax* and *Alice In Wonderland*. He's now the studio head of Digital Eclipse, a studio acclaimed for its reverential treatment of classic games.

Possible mission

When I was 11, *Impossible Mission* for the Commodore 64 lived up to its name – it was digital cruelty at its finest. The game threw legions of robots at you, each armed with electric death. Your character, a slick spy, looked incredible but died beautifully and often. From the moment the villain sneered, "Another visitor. Stay awhile… stay forever!" I was hooked. I stayed forever and died forever, again and again. Dennis Caswell, the game's creator, shifted in my imagination from a brilliant visionary to a diabolical tormentor.

A couple of years earlier, *Star Trek II: The Wrath Of Khan* had rewired my sense of what 'impossible' meant. I learned how Captain Kirk swaggered through the 'no-win scenario' – the Kobayashi Maru – by secretly reprogramming it. Rules were for Vulcans! The lesson was clear: if you can't win, change the game.

I lived by that mantra. I jumped bikes over ravines, leapt from moving cars, dove into shallow rivers – acts of adolescent bravado that were, in retrospect, less 'captain' and more 'idiot'. So when *Impossible Mission* began mocking me, I didn't accept defeat. I looked to upend the 'no-win scenario'.

I was familiar with 'trained' versions of games – hacked versions that granted infinite lives or invulnerability. None existed, as far as I knew, for *Impossible Mission*, which made me wonder: how did those hackers do it?

Enter Disk Maintenance, a dull-sounding utility program that enabled you to peek directly into the magnetic contents of a floppy disk. Most people used it for text swaps or mild file management. I used it like a raccoon rummaging through digital garbage for a byte that controlled the 'number of lives'. My ritual: I'd change a value, reload the game, see if it worked and if not: Reload Disk Maintenance, repeat.

Many hours in, my friend suggested we at least do something fun – edit the robot sprites to make them look dorky. Disk Maintenance had a sprite viewer and editor, so we found the fiendish sprites and began doodling over them. Midway through, a thought struck: what if we just erased the robots? Made them invisible?

I knew enough about collision detection to guess the game used sprite data for hit detection. No sprite, no hit. We zeroed out every dangerous frame we could find. When we loaded it up, the robots were still there logically – we could hear them – but they were invisible. It worked. For ten minutes, we sat in reverent silence, listening to the invisible clatter of our defeated enemies. For the first time, I could explore the subterranean fortress without being derezzed every ten seconds.

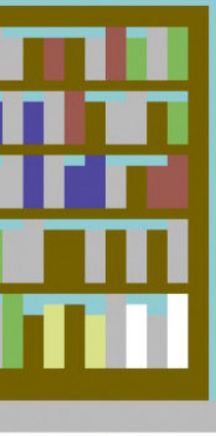
> "After months of torment, I finally reached the great door I'd seen countless times before"

Even with invisible robots, *Impossible Mission* was still brutal. You still had to collect puzzle pieces and assemble them into a final code to reach the end. It was maddening – but now it was possible. After months of torment, I finally reached the great door I'd seen countless times before. This time it opened. Inside waited Dr Atombender, screaming, "No, no, no!" before a calm female voice announced that my mission, my *Impossible Mission*, was complete.

You might ask: how rewarding can it be to beat a game by cheating? Damn rewarding. Because at that point, the real challenge wasn't in beating Caswell's game – it was in understanding and circumventing it. I'd turned the game into a meta-puzzle about itself. Like Kirk, I hadn't accepted the 'no-win scenario', I'd rewritten it. Cheating didn't ruin *Impossible Mission*. It completed it.

There's a moral here, though it's probably not flattering. Sometimes life hands you impossible odds, and the noble thing would be to fail gracefully by the rules. Other times, you find yourself with a belief that "graceful failure" is just failure. In that moment, bending the universe slightly – just enough to tip the scales in your favour – feels less like cheating and more like living.

Like Kirk, I didn't feel guilty. I felt heroic. I had stared into the abyss of *Impossible Mission* and found, hidden between the bytes of data on that floppy disk, a reflection of myself – a kid who, given the choice between losing or rewriting the rules, would choose the latter. Still does. *



Do you agree with Mike's thoughts? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK | retrogamermag.bsky.social | @RetroGamer_Mag | retrogamer@futurenet.com

CELEBRATING TOMONOBU ITAGAKI

THE CREATOR OF DEAD OR ALIVE PASSES

» Tomonobu Itagaki is best known for his work on the Dead Or Alive and Ninja Gaiden series.

The gaming world was in mourning recently, over the news that Tomonobu Itagaki, the creative force behind such series as *Dead Or Alive* and the rebooted *Ninja Gaiden* franchise had passed away at the age of just 58.

Known for his focus on high-intensity action games, his love of wearing sunglasses at all times and for being incredibly outspoken (a relative rarity within the Japanese development community) the news of Itagaki's passing was announced on 16 October, with his family sharing his last words via a Facebook post.

"Final Words," the poignant post began. "The flame of my life is about to go out. The fact that this message has been posted means that my time has finally come. I am no longer in this world. (I have entrusted someone important to me with this final message). My life was a continuous battle which I kept winning. I caused a lot of trouble for others too. I take pride in having fought to the end, and having followed my convictions. I have no regrets, but I am deeply sorry that I could not deliver new works to my fans. I'm sorry. So it goes."

Tomonobu Itagaki started his gaming career on games such as *Tecmo Super Bowl* and *Captain Tsubasa IV*, before creating *Dead Or Alive*. The one-on-one fighting game found great acclaim, for both Itagaki and Tecmo, and was followed by several sequels, including the spin-off series *Dead Or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball*. A collaboration with Microsoft in the early Noughties saw Itagaki not only bringing the *Dead Or Alive* series to the console but reviving the *Ninja Gaiden* series.

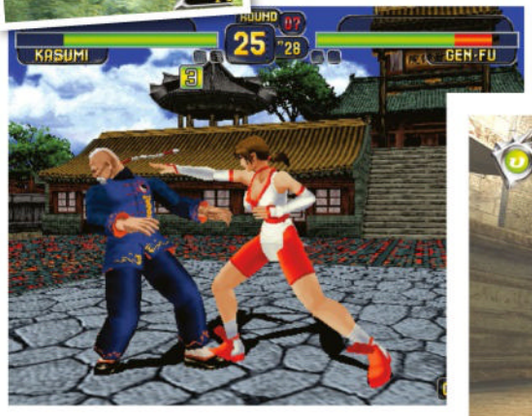
Like *Dead Or Alive* before it, *Ninja Gaiden* was a big success and led to numerous sequels, including *Ninja Gaiden: Dragon Sword*, which Itagaki claimed to be his favourite game in the series in a recent interview with us.

As you can imagine, there was plenty of support from various developers online, particularly from Katsuhiro Harada, who had been the target of numerous jibes from Itagaki over the years, due to his involvement with the *Tekken* series. "It's hard to believe, but Itagaki-san… my senior from university and my rival as a creator has passed away," he wrote. "The last message I ever received from him was, 'Let's go drinking. Let's make some noise soon!'" In fact, Harada shared a huge amount of his memories of Itagaki on his social media, which can be found by visiting x.com/Harada_TEKKEN

Itagaki's former studio, Team Ninja, also paid its respects, posting, "We are deeply saddened by the passing of Team Ninja's first leader, Tomonobu Itagaki. We will carry on the philosophy and creativity that Itagaki-san began and continue to create games that many gamers will enjoy. Our deepest condolences for his loss. From everyone at Team Ninja."

Our thoughts go out to all of Itagaki's friends and family at this difficult time.

» [DS] Itagaki told us that *Dragon Sword* was "one of my proudest works".



» [Arcade] Although it made its debut in arcades, the *Dead Or Alive* series soon headed to consoles.

» [Wii U] While *Devil's Third* was Itagaki's last game, he did tell us, he was making a new game, "but that it is still a secret".

» [Xbox] *Ninja Gaiden* was a triumphant return for Ryu Hayabusa and originally debuted on the Xbox.

RETURN OF THE INTELLIVISION

Atari recently announced that it will be resurrecting the Intellivision in the form of a new plug-and-play system. The Intellivision Sprint is another collaboration between Atari and Plaion and will feature wireless controllers, 45 built-in games and will connect to a TV via HDMI. While there's no support for additional cartridges, you'll be able to play more games via USB-A ports. The system is due to ship from 5 December.

A RARE DEPARTURE

Gregg Mayles, who has been a member of Rare for over 35 years, recently revealed that he has left the company. Mayles has been behind a number of Rare hits, from *Battletoads* and *Donkey Kong Country*, to the *Banjo-Kazooie* games. He was also the designer of *Viva Piñata* and the underrated *Grabbed By The Ghoulies* and directed the recent *Sea Of Thieves*. We're excited to see what he does next.

Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance counsellor who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. You can get more information about Iain by visiting iainleecounselling.com or heading over to patreon.com/iainandKatherine

Fables of the 360

I am starting to come round to the idea that the Xbox 360 is the greatest console of all time. Not the most powerful, don't be silly. That's clearly the 3DO. But the 360 always seemed to me like it was built by magic.

First of all, the design is simply magnificent. After the chunky and intimidating OG Xbox, this thing looked like it had been on the Ozempic in comparison. Of course, at the time we didn't have wonder drugs that would not only help us lose weight but also make us feel constantly nauseous, so we couldn't phrase the comparison in that way. It was clear though that technology had jumped about a million light years.

You know what the sexiest thing on the 360 is? It's the power button. That beautiful, smooth, satisfying button. You know me team – as part of my ADHD I get very excited by the tactility of things. And my word, that button does things to me. The delight of pushing it in, the green lights around it. OK, when your ring is red you're in trouble, but I've only ever had that happen to me on three machines. Hmm, that's actually pretty bad odds I suppose. But you could always get an extra 15 minutes of gameplay from a broken 360 by wrapping it in a towel and heating the thing to a million degrees. That was always quite a fun thing to do. It felt very naughty.

Of course, the key thing we want from a console is good games. And the 360 had them coming out of the wazoo. *Fable II* was clearly a masterpiece and the best of all the *Fable*s. Here's an interesting side note I'm probably not supposed to share but they didn't get me to sign an NDA or anything. A year or two ago I was approached by the company making the new *Fable* and they asked if I'd be interested in workshopping and then voicing a character for a new *Fable*? It was supposed to be a washed up rockstar kind of thing. I got well excited and told them that of course I would love to and then… I never heard from them again. I must learn to stop getting excited when people dangle the carrot of an exciting gig in my face.

Microsoft jumped off a cliff after the 360. Every machine that's come since has been just OK. No huge leaps forward, no new innovation. Just rather soulless black or white boxes with games of varying quality. The fact they've actually just increased the price of their consoles in the middle of its lifespan shows just how crappy things are in modern gaming. I know I'm old and supposed to think the past was better, but do your kids get excited about Xbox like we did back in the day? Yes, I was ancient even when the 360 came out but please don't age shame me. At least I have a full head of hair. *

> "Yes, I was ancient even when the 360 came out but please don't age shame me"

Do you agree with Iain's thoughts? Contact us at:

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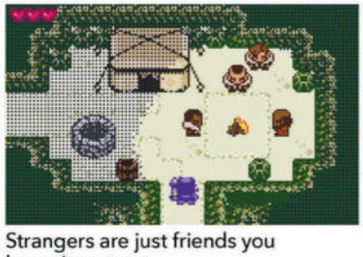
Strangers are just friends you haven't met yet.

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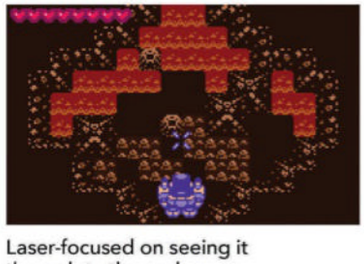
The uninhabitable Surface, not so uninhabited.


Laser-focused on seeing it through to the end.

Published by Panic®

COMING SOON TO

Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000.

Back to R-Type

It's very important for you to know one thing: I'm not an actor. I might have a couple of YouTube channels, but I'm generally more comfortable behind the camera. Nevertheless, by the time you read this you might've seen my face pop up – quite literally – in an advert for the HD remaster of *R-Type Delta*.

Not being an actor, I'm still not entirely sure why they asked me to feature in the ad, beyond them needing a middle-aged bloke to sit up in bed and scream like he has just woken up from a bad dream. What I will say is that when you see it… just remember I had to do multiple takes of that shot, and I spent the next week with a bad back.

But anyway. Part of the reason I agreed to do the ad – aside from the fact I found it hilarious that I might end up in the pantheon of advert greats such as Lorraine Chase, the Jolly Green Giant and Captain Birdseye – is that *R-Type* is an old favourite of mine.

I can remember the first time I saw the game; there used to be a pub near my house which was well known to all the teenagers in my area because the landlord wasn't exactly… um… precious about asking for ID. Consequently, the year after I left school you'd usually find my old classmates in there. And… they had an *R-Type* machine.

I remember very vividly watching an old mate of mine called Patrick play it. He'd been one of those friends you have as a kid, who was absolutely my best mate for life… for an entire summer – and then we barely spoke again once we went back to school. At least, until the evening, many years later, that I watched him playing *R-Type*.

To this day I don't think I've ever seen anybody play a game like that. He was – as they say – one with the machine, his hands and fingers a blur. He gave me a running commentary as he played, but I marvelled at the shamelessly *Alien*/Giger-inspired visuals. I desperately wanted my turn, but I don't think he ever lost a life in the time I was there, so I just let him get on with it.

Shortly afterwards, I bought the home conversion for my Atari ST. Which, having just had a go to refresh my memory, is not a bad version. The framerate sucks – and is an extra part of the challenge – but visually and gameplay-wise it's all there.

What I will say is that I quickly learned that I am not Patrick. I sucked at *R-Type*, and I still do. I'm not sure I ever got far beyond the second level. I don't think I'm alone in that, which is probably why the first boss has become such an iconic image. I actually find side-scrolling shooters incredibly stressful – probably more so than any other genre. They're not fun for me to play. They put me in a bad mood. But they're also the closest videogames get to smoking – I know they're having a negative effect, but I can't stop.

Cut to 30 years later, and *R-Type* is still having a negative effect on me, but this time it's my lower back.

Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at:

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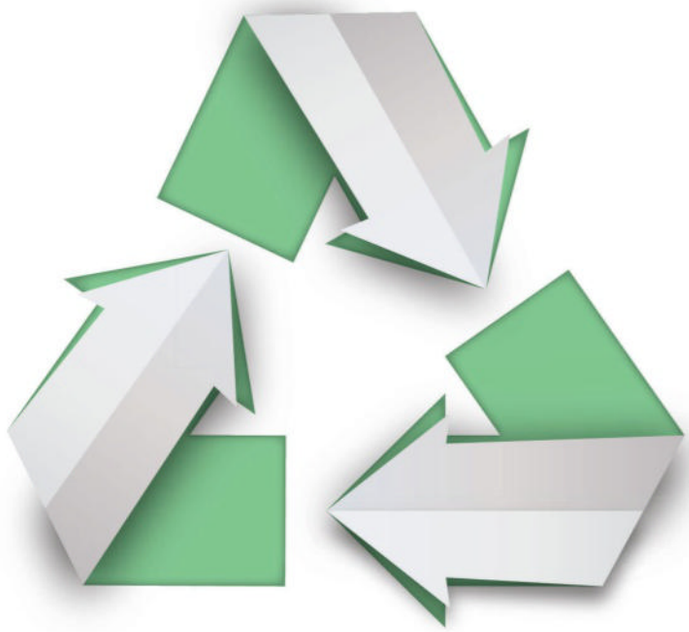

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» [Playdate] Jona says the cast includes "everyone that we've loved watching grow and perform in Los Angeles".

Blippo+

We speak to the designers of an indie game about retro TV that's out of this world

Are you pining for the glory days of channel surfing, left cold by the rise of streaming services? If so, you may well be tempted by the interplanetary televisual treats of *Blippo+*, which recently arrived on Switch and PC after making its debut on Playdate earlier this year. It's an unconventional game, but Claire L Evans and Jona Bechtolt aren't conventional game designers, being far better known for their band Yacht. We caught up with them to learn more about one of our favourite indie games of the year.

What inspired you to make a game themed around old TV?
Jona: In 2020, I don't know – it arrived in my head like a flash of lightning, that we should start with an electronic programme guide and then build something out from there. We were watching hotel TV, and I was like, "Oh, yeah. How come someone hasn't done something with this? How come someone hasn't completely misused, or just screwed with the idea of there being fictional programming within a very ubiquitous, but kind of boring and forgotten interface?"

Claire: Then it becomes like, "Well, how do we fill this interface?" That was kind of an obvious proposition, because we have this video artist friend, JJ Stratford, who directed all the live-action elements of the game in her studio, and we knew that she knew how to make precisely the kind of TV that these interfaces were born to host.

FMV games were a big deal in the Nineties, but soon tailed off. Do you have any favourite games of that type?
Jona: The first game that I ever saw that really blew my mind was *Night Trap*. My parents had a gas station that also doubled as a video rental store, and then later a videogame rental store, and this is in rural Oregon. We had a Sega CD that we rented out, so we had a copy of *Night Trap* and *Sewer Shark* was the other one. Those two came out around the same time, and made a big impact on me.

The Playdate doesn't feel like an obvious format for a game that's based around video – why was it designed for that particular hardware?
Jona: Panic showed us a prototype

» *Blippo+* designers Jona (left) and Claire (centre), along with their Yacht bandmate Rob Kieswetter (right).

» [PC] Making progress in *Blippo+* is about watching as much as you can, and piecing together the narrative yourself.

» [PC] Femtofax is very clearly inspired by Teletext services such as the BBC's Ceefax.

» [PC] Blip's TV networks feature all sorts of shows – talk shows, news reports, soaps and more.

of the Playdate ten years ago when we were both at a music festival, and they extended an offer to us as a band – if we wanted to make something for the Playdate, they would support it as a publisher. We had to stop touring because of COVID, and that's when we seriously started messing with video, and the whole thing spun out from there.

Claire: The Playdate has this incredible season model. So you buy a season of games, and you get, sight unseen, these different games delivered to your inbox every Thursday morning. A literal season of television can fit really well into that format.

Jona: Thursdays were a huge day in television in America. That was when 'Must See TV' was branded, it felt perfect.

Claire: We tested video on the Playdate, and it just looked so different than anything we've seen. It was this weird combination of low resolution and high framerate, so it reads really well.

Jona: It doesn't look like the device should be able to play video. So it feels like you have this weird little cyberpunk device from an alternate dimension.

The shows that feature in *Blippo+* seem to be inspired by late-Seventies and early Eighties TV – why did you choose that time period?

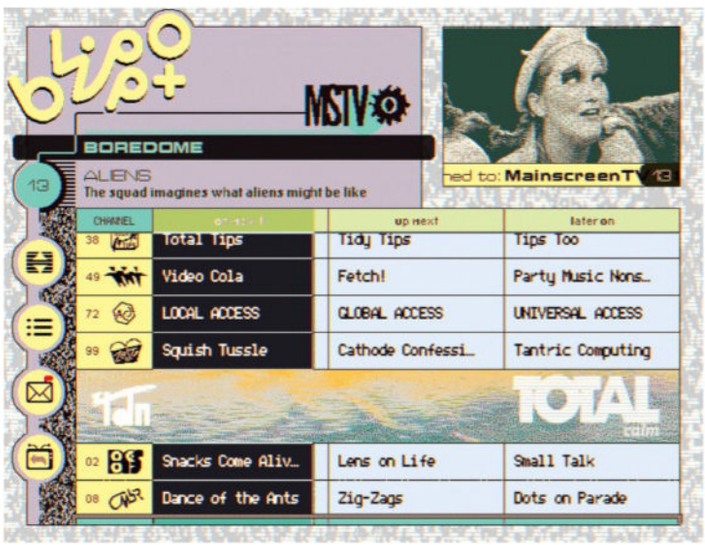
Claire: This game has a lot of things, but it's also a love letter to our mother and father, television, you know? Our collaborator JJ grew up in the Eighties, she was watching a lot of TV after school, was kind of a latchkey kid in Hollywood. I actually immigrated to the US when I was very young, and everything I learned about the US, I learned from Seventies and Eighties TV that was playing in France when I was a kid. It's also sort of the last era of real craft in television production, before the ascendance of the computer. Everything's practical, everything is sets, there's still this sort of charming, rustic wonkiness – it's not as polished as television is now.

Jona: The focus was on artistry, and there was funding for the arts before [Ronald] Reagan. So yeah, America has changed its priorities on what media is for, and who it's for, and it used to be about showcasing art and artists, and it was incredibly beautiful. Before the video store, my dad worked at PBS until I was five years old. So, I have a deep, deep love for public television and what it's supposed to do, and what it can do, because it's so powerful.

The shows in *Blippo+* come from Blip, a planet much like our own. How would you describe your vision of Blip?

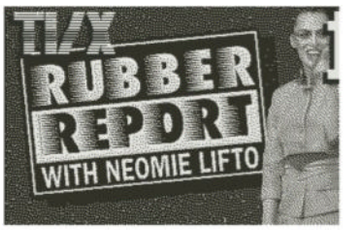
Claire: Blip is everywhere we want to be, you know? On one level, it's a world in which all our favourite, art and culture wasn't sidelined, but actually was able to thrive and continue and become the dominant culture. It's obviously a post-capitalist utopia. It's post-scarcity, all power and energy comes from a single house plant. There's enormous enthusiasm for creativity and art and music and culture. It's also just a very silly world. I feel like a lot of people have flagged that planet Blip has a very British sense of humour – there definitely is that dryness. It's a better world.

Jona: And it's real – it's a real place, for sure. ✱



» [PC] The electronic programme guide is the key technology that birthed the concept of *Blippo+*.

» Telefantasy Studios, founded by JJ Stratford (pictured), was crucial to creating Blip's visual identity.



» [Playdate] The 1-bit display of the Playdate enhances the concept of alien transmissions breaking through the static.

> "This game has a lot of things, but it's also a love letter to our mother and father, television, you know?"
> **CLAIRE L EVANS**

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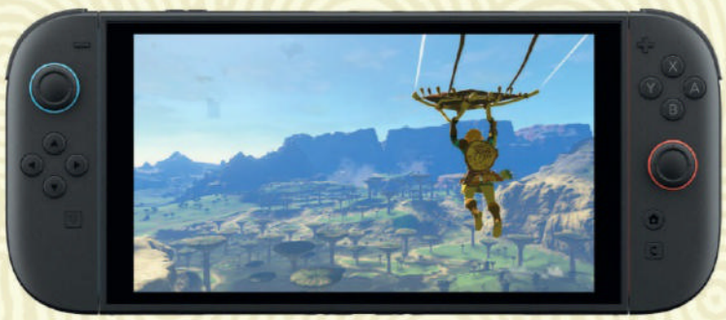

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BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES

JUNE 2009 – The Wii has a new top contender, Capcom gives us something to grapple with and the month's big PC game refuses to be pigeonholed into a single genre. Nick Thorpe is driving the time machine once again, and this time we're going off-road

» [Wii] Uh-oh, looks like Mac's about to get clobbered. Time to duck that blow, champ!

NEWS JUNE 2009

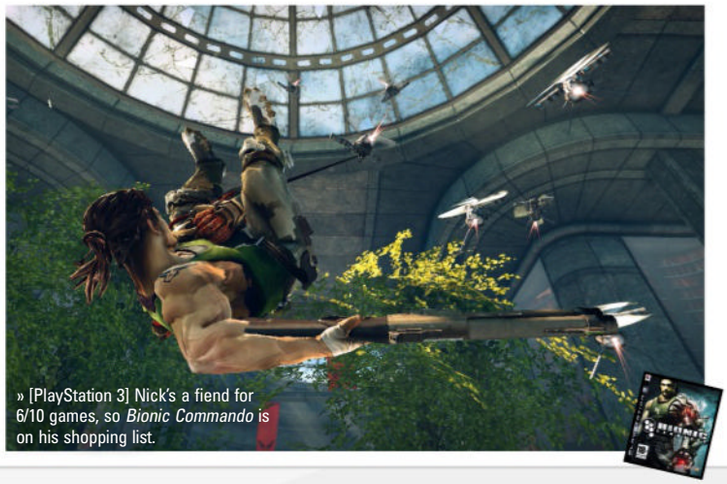
American car manufacturer General Motors filed for bankruptcy on 1 June, with $82.29 billion in assets and $172.81 billion in debt – one of the largest bankruptcies in American history. The new company that emerged from proceedings kept the Chevrolet, Cadillac, GMC and Buick brands, but looked to shed a quarter of its 80,000 employees, closing 14 plants and 2,400 dealerships in the process. General Motors was the second of the big three US auto makers to enter bankruptcy in 2009, following Chrysler in April.

On 25 June, Michael Jackson passed away at the age of 50. The renowned performer entered the music business at just six years old, gaining initial fame as part of the Jackson 5 before becoming an extraordinarily successful solo artist, selling hundreds of millions of records. He also became a controversial figure, in large part because of allegations of child abuse, but was preparing to resume performing with a 50-show residency at London's O2 Arena to begin in July. Jackson's personal physician Conrad Murray accidentally caused a fatal cardiac arrest by administering an overdose, for which he was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter.

THE LATEST NEWS FROM JUNE 2009

As the global economy continues to stutter, the world needs a win for the underdog – so who better than Little Mac? *Punch-Out!!* earned a comeback fight after a lengthy absence, and it was a strong showing. The game earned 91% from *Official Nintendo Magazine*, with the review stating that it looked "absolutely incredible" and had "loads of cheeky winks that will appeal to fans of the series", but had a "weak" multiplayer mode. *NGamer* gave it 85%, saying that the game "boasts the sort of design clarity that went out of fashion when consoles started coming with 20-button controllers in the late '90s" and that "the big surprise is how well the motion controls work". The review concluded that it was "an odd choice for a revival, but it suits the Wii perfectly".

Another NES-era favourite returned on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, to rather less critical acclaim. Capcom's grappling hook game *Bionic Commando* made the jump to 3D, and earned 8/10 from *X360* for offering "an excellent swing mechanic, giant setpieces and a meaty challenge". *Play* also liked it, giving it 81%. However, *Official PlayStation Magazine*, *Official Xbox 360 Magazine*, *games™* and *Edge* all gave it 6/10. "Vast portions of each level, none of which have any narrative structure, exist solely to prolong Spencer's journey between battles," *Edge* complained. By contrast "levels that are too short and too uninspiring" was *OXM*'s primary complaint. "After several hours of increasingly punishing shoot/swing repetition, all the good ideas come at once in the last hour or so," *games™* lamented. Still, the magazine would "welcome, nay, encourage" a sequel to the "fiddly and obnoxious" game.



» [PlayStation 3] Nick's a fiend for 6/10 games, so *Bionic Commando* is on his shopping list.

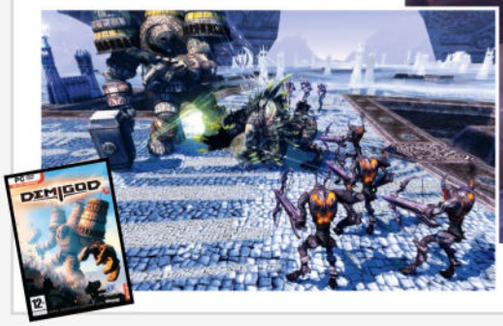
X-Men Origins: Wolverine attracted an interesting spread of scores, getting 4/5 in *360*, 71% in *Play*, 7/10 each from *OXM*, *X360* and *games™*, 6/10 in *Edge* and 5/10 in *OPM*. At the top end, *360* felt that it was a *God Of War* clone, but that "it's done so well and with such ferocity that we can forgive it, especially as there is no *God Of War* on the Xbox 360". Noting the generally poor quality of licensed movie tie-ins, games™ felt that "to play one that's actually had some attention poured into it like adamantium over bone is a wonderfully uplifting blast of fresh air". Less impressed than the other magazines, *OPM* felt that it was a "distinctly average" brawler that suffered from "visual sadness, which includes duff lighting, awkward cameras, and the stuttering Zoetrope-style framerate".

Over on the PC, *Demigods* offered players an experience that *games™* described as "a multiplayer-orientated action-RPG/RTS hybrid", which was "clearly inspired in no small part by *Warcraft III* mod *Defense Of The Ancients*" – a multiplayer online battle arena or MOBA, in modern parlance. The magazine felt it to be "a polished, balanced and, most of all, massively entertaining example of genre splicing" that was suffering from an "initial failure in the online department" – good for an 8/10 score. It also got 81% from *PC Gamer* and 7/10 from *Edge*. *Total PC Gaming* felt that, "*Demigod*'s fun lies in experimentation, unlocking abilities, figuring out just what counters what, how much it'll cost, and whether those towers of yours will hold out long enough for you to port back and unleash it," but felt the networking issues were "truly depressing," giving a 7/10 score overall.

Finally, *Pokémon Platinum* continued the long tradition of enhanced third versions of core games in the series, this one joining *Pokémon Diamond* and *Pearl*. Additions include the new Distortion World area, the Battle Frontier challenges and new Wi-Fi Plaza minigames. The game scored 92% in *ONM*, which called it "the definitive *Pokémon* DS experience", but cautioned owners of the existing games to "ask yourself if it's worth spending another £30 to plough through a two-year-old game that's 95% identical to the one you already have". By contrast, *games™* felt that new forms of Pokémon such as Giratina and Shaymin would "help *Platinum* appeal to a far wider audience than just newcomers, the usual optimal demographic for these third games". That was good enough for a score of 8/10. With *NGamer* scoring it 89% last month, it was a warmly received game overall.

Join us again next month, when we'll be bringing you the summer's ghostly frights and plenty of fist fights. ✱

» [DS] 'Eezer Goode, 'Eezer Goode – oh wait, that's The Shamen, not Shaymin. Our bad.



» [PC] Living with MOBA players is fun, so long as you don't end up playing with them.

» [Xbox 360] Why is Wolverine so fond of wearing so little? He might heal well, but surely he gets cold?

CHARTS

JUNE 2009

XBOX 360

1 – **Resident Evil 5** (Capcom)
2 – **Wheelman** (Ubisoft)
3 – **Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare** (Activision)
4 – **Street Fighter IV** (Capcom)
5 – **Wanted: Weapons Of Fate** (Warner Bros)

PLAYSTATION 3

1 – **Resident Evil 5** (Capcom)
2 – **Street Fighter IV** (Capcom)
3 – **Killzone 2** (Sony)
4 – **Wheelman** (Ubisoft)
5 – **Tom Clancy's HAWX** (Ubisoft)

PSP

1 – **Resistance: Retribution** (Sony)
2 – **FIFA 09** (EA)
3 – **Ben 10: Alien Force** (D3Publisher)
4 – **Football Manager Handheld 2009** (Sega)
5 – **Need For Speed Undercover** (EA)

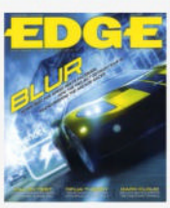
MUSIC

1 – **Mama Do** (Pixie Lott)
2 – **Boom Boom Pow** (Black Eyed Peas)
3 – **Release Me** (Agnes)
4 – **Bonkers** (Dizzee Rascal & Armand van Helden)
5 – **Red** (Daniel Merriweather)

THIS MONTH IN...

360

Discussing Acclaim's release of *BMX XXX*, *360* muses "such thinking would have also given the world '*Vexx 2: Sexx*', '*Turok: Booty Hunter*' and *ShadowMan: 2econd Coming*. Oh, hang on, they did release that last one."



Edge

"What's the secret of *Pokémon*'s success?" asks Edge. Junichi Masuda of Game Freak says it's like fishing. "Or you could say it's like soccer or basketball – a simple, natural and enjoyable experience." Don't question it.

Play

"We've been waiting for *Devil May Cry* to arrive on the PSP for some time now, but according to Japanese gaming magazine *Famitsu*, the project has been canned," the mag reports. PSP news rarely seems to be good.

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Fishing Derby

THE REEL FISHING SIMULATOR

» ATARI 2600 » 1980 » DAVID CRANE

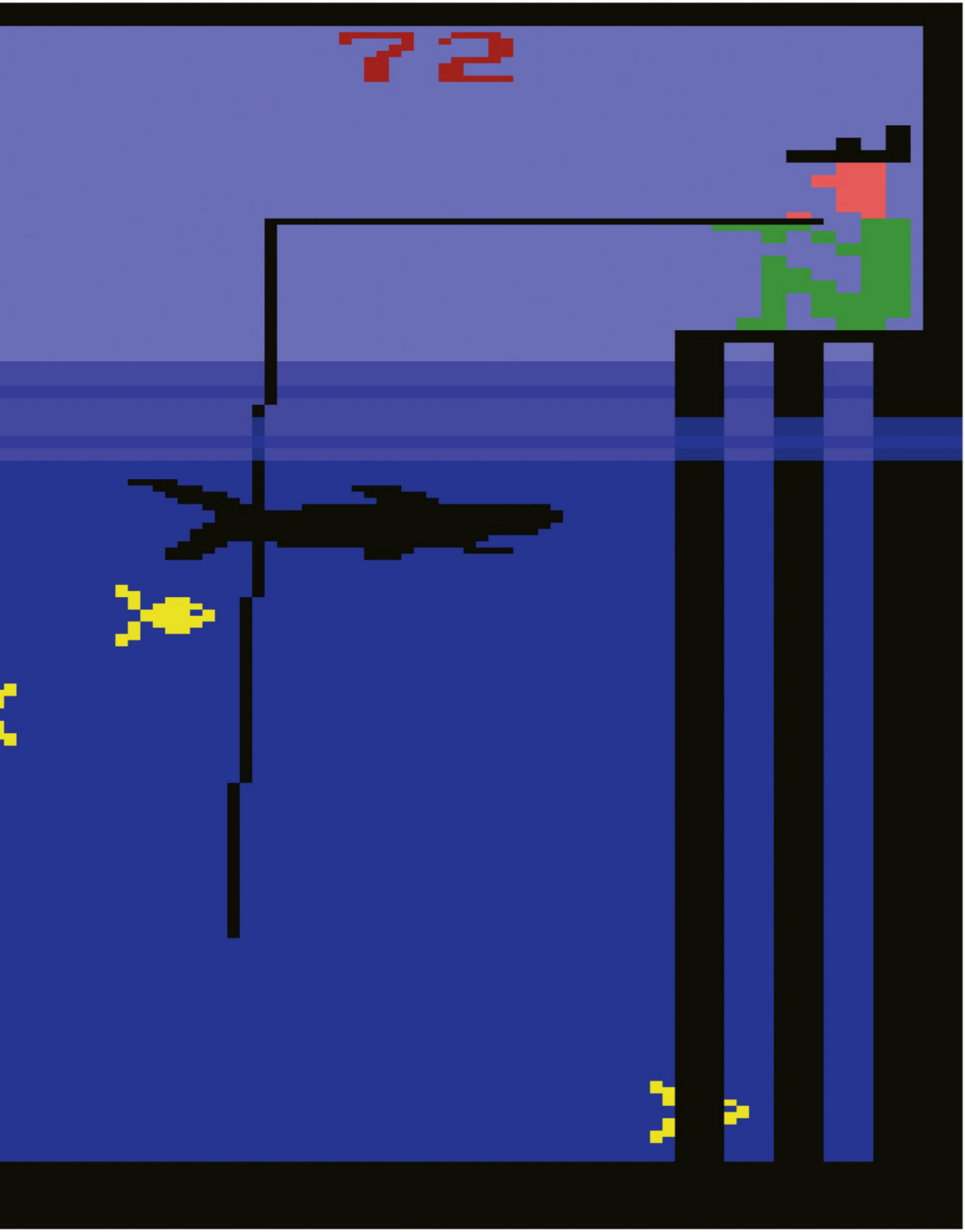
Although I never owned an Atari 2600 on release, several kids in my area did, so I regularly got to play on one. All in all, I think I knew four people with the console and they had a decent number of games between them, so there was never a shortage of things to play.

I'm pretty sure the first time I played *Fishing Derby* was during this period and I was instantly interested because my grandad had recently taught me how to fish (a hobby I never pursued) and the game itself had nice, chunky, eye-catching visuals that really appealed to me at the time.

Fishing Derby is a good example of an early title that excels as a two-player experience, but isn't as enjoyable when you're playing on your own. This kind of makes sense as David Crane apparently worked on it as a tech demo and added a shark to make the game a little more interesting. The goal of *Fishing Derby* is simple: catch 99 pounds of fish before your opponent does and mechanically it's extremely basic. Drop your line and simply try and hook a fish, once caught, pressing the joystick's fire button to reel the sucker in. The joystick also controls the depth of your line and also how far you wish to cast it, meaning it's all very intuitive.

The problem comes from the fact that only one fisherman can reel in a fish at a time, so you have to decide whether it's worth trying to catch the heavier fishes or simply try and snag the lighter ones that are nearer to the surface. There's also that hungry shark to consider.

The reason *Fishing Derby* works so well as a two-player game is that a human opponent is far more manageable than the computer. The AI is surprisingly adept at catching fish before you, so it can often be quite frustrating as a solo experience. Playing against a mate also lets you can use smack talk and other tactics to distract them. Not very sporting, but plenty of people say that about fishing anyway. ✱


72

20 YEARS OF THE XBOX

TWO DECADES AGO, MICROSOFT SOUGHT TO USHER IN A NEW ERA OF GAMES – BIGGER GAMES, SMALLER GAMES, AND GAMES THAT WOULD BE MORE CONNECTED THAN EVER BEFORE. WE JOIN THOSE WHO WORKED WITH THE SYSTEM DURING ITS LIFETIME TO LOOK BACK AT THE MOST BELOVED XBOX CONSOLE

WORDS BY NICK THORPE

MARTYN CHUDLEY
Founder, Bizarre Creations

MIKE MIKA
Studio head, Digital Eclipse/Backbone Entertainment

JON GORDON
News editor, *360 Magazine*

When Robbie Bach outlined Microsoft's ambitions for the successor to the Xbox in 2005, they were simple but undeniably bold. "Last generation we were thought leaders. This generation we plan to be market leader." Sure, the original Xbox was a powerful console with plenty of great games, but its lifetime sales only barely scraped past those of the GameCube – Nintendo's least successful traditional console to that point – leaving Microsoft as a distant second-place player in the home-console market. What's more, the mammoth corporation had racked up $4 billion in losses over four years to get that far. Few companies would have been able to absorb such costs, but Microsoft was willing and able to pay for a foothold in a potentially lucrative market. This time around, things would have to be different – successful companies don't stay successful by losing vast sums of money, after all.

> "THE 360 TURNED OUT TO BE AN IMPRESSIVE MACHINE, FAR BEYOND ANYTHING I HAD PERSONALLY EXPECTED"
> **DAVID BONE GILL**

» [Xbox 360] *Geometry Wars* was the XBLA poster child, a small download offering affordable thrills.

Of course, this time around, there was an entire philosophy behind the new console, known as the Xbox 360 rather than the Xbox 2 because "it isn't in the same era" as *Edge* reported J Allard's explanation. At E3 2005, Allard described the new machine as, "A product with games at its core, surrounded by limitless connected digital entertainment." What did that mean, behind the buzzwords? "As well as a standard network connection, the 360 is also compatible with an optional Wi-Fi adapter," *Edge* magazine explained. "As is already becoming standard on Xbox games, this will allow for game updates and add-ons to be downloaded – both free and paid for by the 360's integrated payment system. Demos can also be made available, and the service may promise a new dawn for the concept of episodic games. The Live service will continue much as it is now. Gamertags – and even Live accounts – will be transferable to new machines, and subscriptions via pre-payment cards will be introduced to open the service up to those who don't have credit cards." The magazine concluded, "If Xbox was proof of concept, 360 is intended to make Live omnipresent." The strategy made sense – Microsoft had the best existing online console service, and the company judged that this was the generation in which players would embrace the benefits of networking their machines.

The original Xbox was also known for its power, and the new machine packed a 3.2GHz, triple-core PowerPC CPU named Xenon, 512MB of unified GDDR3 RAM and a 500MHz ATI Xenos GPU – beefy enough

LEE JACKSON
QA technician – Avatars, *Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts And Bolts*, *Kinect Sports Season 2*

DAVID BONE GILL
UI programmer, Bizarre Creations

JAMES SILVA
Founder, Ska Studios

360

» Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer demonstrate the Xbox 360 at CES with *Fight Night Round 3*.

» [Xbox 360] The *Project Gotham Racing* series had always aimed for photorealism, and got the closest it had yet.

» [Xbox 360] Casual games from PopCap were among the early successes on Xbox Live Arcade.

» [Xbox 360] Tecmo had been a prominent Xbox developer, and made waves early with *Dead Or Alive 4*.

» [Xbox 360] *Dead Rising* highlighted a generational leap in the number of animated characters consoles could display.

that high-definition output would be the new normal, with 720p as a minimum standard. Games would still primarily be delivered on DVD, and unlike the original machine, a hard disk would be optional. "I remember seeing it at E3 2005 like everyone else. As someone who was a huge Jeff Minter fan, seeing his visualiser completely blew my mind," says Mike Mika, who worked on a variety of Xbox 360 games with Digital Eclipse and Backbone Entertainment. "The show floor footage for *Dead Or Alive*, *Project Gotham Racing* and *Gears Of War*, if I recall correctly, really felt like Microsoft was in it to win it."

It had been a long road, getting to that point. "I think we were starting to get a glimpse of an 'Xbox2' or 'Xbox Future' (under the strictest confidence) around August 2003, and we were informed that the CPU and GPU were 'locked down' in September 2003," says Martyn Chudley, whose studio Bizarre Creations was just finishing *Project Gotham Racing 2* at that time. "Although we weren't given too many details, between both us at Bizarre and Microsoft, we started some brainstorming for *PGR3*. We received our first alpha kits in January ▶

» [Xbox 360] *Gears Of War* sold millions, and highlighted the graphical grunt of the console.

» [Xbox 360] With games like *Viva Piñata*, Rare was relied upon to hold up the family friendly side of the library.

2004, and it was around February 2004 when we first started to put together a set of 'final' project goals for *Gotham 3*, based on the new hardware. With the projected launch of the machine to be late-2005, we would have roughly 18 months to build a whole new game engine and toolset around the new hardware, and of course, make a game!"

"The [Power Mac] G5 was only emulating the Xenon, so we didn't really understand what the machine was truly capable of until we got the final hardware," says David Bone Gill, who was working as a UI programmer on *Project Gotham Racing 3* at Bizarre Creations, remembering those early kits. "The 360 turned out to be an impressive machine, far beyond anything I had personally expected." Speaking to *Edge* in 2005, fellow Bizarre Creations coder Roger Perkins compared the new machine to the old one, saying that, "The [Xbox 360] processor and architecture isn't as forgiving about doing things badly as the old Intel chips were. However, do things the way it likes and the thing springs to life and screams along." He

Credit Evan Amos

MODEL STUDENT THE VARIOUS INCARNATIONS OF THE XBOX 360

XBOX 360

The original model of Xbox 360 came in two distinct flavours. Pro models came with a component AV cable, a wireless controller and a bundled 20GB hard disk (60GB from 2008). The cheaper Core package had composite AV and a wired controller. In 2007, the Core package was replaced with the Arcade bundle, which included the component AV cable and wireless controller, plus an Xbox Live Arcade compilation disc and a 256MB memory unit – replaced with 256MB internal storage in 2008 and 512MB in 2009. Consoles sold as Pro models are distinguished from their budget counterparts by chrome disc trays.

XBOX 360 ELITE

This model was introduced as a premium option in 2007, and was distinguished from the Pro model by its black casing and a comparatively huge 120GB hard disk. The console also came with an HDMI cable for the model's biggest new feature, the HDMI port, which was exclusive to Elite models for a few months before being rolled out to Pro and Arcade systems in the autumn of 2007. In 2009, the bundled HDMI cable was dropped, but the hard disk was upgraded to an even bigger 250GB model, with a second wireless controller and a bundled game added to the package.

XBOX 360 S

The first major redesign was introduced in 2010, and is smaller but includes plenty of changes. Wireless networking, a dedicated Kinect port and optical audio output have been added, while swappable faceplates and memory unit slots have been removed, and the hard disk connection has been placed internally. Units were initially black, with those sold with 250GB hard disks distinguished from their 4GB internal memory counterparts by a glossy finish, but glossy models were discontinued in 2011. 320GB special editions were introduced in 2011, and 4GB white models bundled with Kinect arrived in 2012.

XBOX 360 E

The final version of the Xbox 360 was introduced in the summer of 2013, and adopted some of the aesthetic sensibilities of the recently unveiled Xbox One. Though generally similar to the Xbox 360 S, down to the distinction between 4GB and 250GB models, the Xbox 360 E has a few cost-cutting measures. The number of USB ports has been reduced by one, the optical audio output port is gone, and the proprietary Xbox 360 AV connector has been replaced with a 3.5mm jack that only outputs composite AV – thankfully, HDMI is retained. A special blue 500GB model launched in 2014.

» Though Microsoft had little luck with Japanese players, the development community embraced the Xbox 360.

» [Xbox 360] *BioShock* was a hugely impressive game, and arrived on the 360 a year ahead of the PS3.

» [Xbox 360] *Halo 3* was enormously popular, generating record-breaking launch day sales of $170 million in the US.

» [Xbox 360] Without XBLA, it's unlikely that games like Jeff Minter's *Space Giraffe* would have seen release.

also felt that the Xbox 360's superior pixel fill-rate would make it far better at post-processing special effects than the old machine.

"We needed to go with quality and fidelity, and not play the 'numbers' game that so many racing games of the time were doing, each game iteration seemingly having *more* cars, or circuits or whatever," Martyn recalls. "We essentially decided that the game needed to show off the prowess of the hardware, so we wanted a massive increase in detail for both car and environment models, the inclusion of detailed car interiors (not done before), and finally the addition of 3D-animated spectators to help bring the cities to life." The developers also chose to focus on performance cars for this game to add to the feeling of a generational leap. "We actually had a car 'bible' and stipulated that cars had to be capable of 170mph and were recognisable as 'poster' cars," Martyn notes.

In the past, standard-definition displays were the default, and moving to an environment where players could be using anything from 4:3, 480i standard-definition sets to 16:9, 1080i displays caused some headaches. "We take it for granted these days that UI designs need to be flexible, especially with the advent of mobile gaming, but it was all new to us," says Bone. "Our target was 16:9 at 720p, and the assets were built with this resolution in mind. Nearly all the assets were bitmaps, so they didn't scale as well as modern vector-based UIs. Using 720p as the target resolution for *PGR3* was a little ironic, given that the output was upscaled from 600p due to a memory limitation of the 360," he recalls. "Microsoft later outlawed this with a new [Technical Content Requirement], but they also provided a software workaround, which we couldn't implement in time for launch."

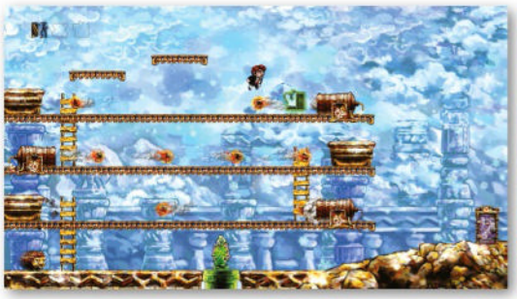
Microsoft relied heavily on its third-party publishers for launch games – its own efforts would extend to *Perfect Dark Zero* and *Kameo: Elements Of Power* from Rare, and *Project Gotham Racing 3*. "Our game really showed off the machine – it was a great tech demo – and it was amazing watching it run at full pelt," says Bone. Martyn felt the same way, and after reviewing footage he'd taken of a private demonstration to the press, he decided the studio needed to be proactive. "At the time assets being released were being tightly controlled by the MS marketing department, so naughtily we orchestrated a bit of a 'leak' of this video through a journalist friend of the company, and as hoped for it went down an absolutely storm with the public as it truly looked like nothing else out there," he admits. "I think if we had gone through official channels, this video would never have seen the light of day… I'm still not sure if we ever came clean about this with the Microsoft people!"

> "TO BE ABLE TO DOWNLOAD AND DEMO (AND PURCHASE) GAMES ON DEMAND WAS REVOLUTIONARY IN THE CONSOLE SPACE"
> **MARTYN CHUDLEY**

Packaged games on shelves like that weren't the whole story though, thanks to the downloadable games of Xbox Live Arcade. A service by the same name had launched late in 2004 for the original Xbox, but it required an additional disc and had a fairly limited library, whereas the Xbox 360 incarnation was available as standard to any player with an internet connection. The service initially offered an eclectic mix of arcade classics like *Smash TV* and *Gauntlet*, indie games like *Marble Blast Ultra* and *Mutant Storm Reloaded*, and casual hits like *Bejeweled 2* and *Zuma*. "They really leaned into the arcade spirit with Xbox Live Arcade. At the time, games had to stay under a strict size limit, something like 50MB, so there wasn't much room for anything sprawling or too cinematic. That constraint forced a visceral kind of creativity; you had to think like an old-school arcade developer again," says Mike. "Our Vancouver studio was the one that blazed our trail onto the 360, because they were quite literally porting classic arcade games. It's the same talented group who'd eventually go on to form Code Mystics. It was a scrappy, exciting era where small teams could still make big impressions."

» [Xbox 360] The shift to HD made 30fps targets common, but *Ninja Gaiden II* was ambitious in aiming for 60fps.

» [Xbox 360] Getting *Grand Theft Auto IV* simultaneously with the PS3 was a huge coup for Microsoft.



» [Xbox 360] *Braid* was the critical darling of the first Summer Of Arcade line-up in 2008.

The first big success story on the service was *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*, a twin-stick shooter from Bizarre Creations that offered huge value for just 400 Microsoft Points – £3.40 in real money. How big of an impact did Xbox Live Arcade make? "I would say huge – it really was delivering a consolidated online platform that was not available elsewhere in the console market," says Martyn. "Obviously PC gamers had had this sort of experience for years, but to be able to download and demo (and purchase) games on demand was revolutionary in the console space. Also the (then) relatively low prices of these games was a massive factor, and we were lucky enough to have such a high-quality title as *Geometry Wars*, so this was for us the perfect storm."

> "VIVA PIÑATA SHOWED THAT THE 360 WAS MORE THAN CAPABLE OF CREATING WORLDS FULL OF COLOUR AND CHARM"
> **LEE JACKSON**

The Xbox 360 launched on 22 November 2005 in North America, swiftly followed by Europe on 2 December and Japan on 10 December. Microsoft struggled to supply enough consoles to keep up with early demand, but still sold 326,000 of them in November alone. Chart-Track reported that 70,000 consoles were shipped in the first three days on sale in the UK – a record for a home console, but a long way short of the PSP's opening weekend sales of 185,000 just a few months earlier. *Perfect Dark Zero* was the best-selling game that weekend, followed in order by *Project Gotham Racing 3*, *Call Of Duty 2*, *Condemned: Criminal Origins* and *Need For Speed: Most Wanted*. Japan's launch was rather more muted, with Microsoft reporting sales of 43,970 – a figure *Edge* reported as being "a little under a third of the country's initial shipment". *Ridge Racer 6* was comfortably the most popular launch game there, with 22,276 sales putting it roughly 8,500 ahead of *Perfect Dark Zero* in second place. Still, this was a predictable outcome as the original Xbox had never been popular in Japan. Players were impressed with the hardware, too. "My first true impression of it was when I saw it in-person at a friend's house. Owning a GameCube at the time, I was shocked at just how much of a technical leap the 360 was from the previous generation, especially when getting a proper look at the difference between SD and HD," says Lee Jackson, who worked in QA roles on a variety of Xbox 360 projects.

There was no guarantee that an early launch would work out in the long run, though – after all, Sega had broken launch records with the Dreamcast six years earlier, only to discover that the majority of players were happy to wait to see what the competition had to offer. Nintendo was taking its own route with the Wii, a less powerful system intended to appeal to a wide audience with motion controls. However, Sony seemed to be counting on players waiting, as, "The next generation doesn't start until we say it does," was Kaz Hirai's message for the assembled press at a pre-E3 news conference in 2006. The Xbox 360 had already bolstered its roster of convincingly next-gen games with *Dead Or*

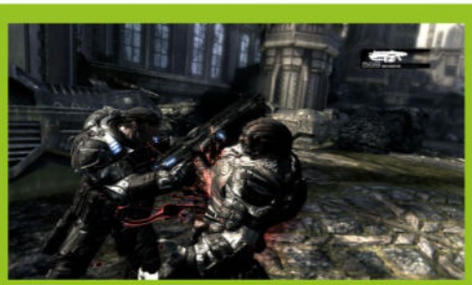
FRANCHISE STARTERS FAMOUS FRANCHISES THAT GOT THEIR

CRACKDOWN

Leaping around as a super-powered police officer in this open-world crime-fighting caper felt great back in 2007, and an Xbox 360 sequel followed in 2010. Unfortunately, *Crackdown 3* suffered delays due to a troubled development, and released on Xbox One to middling reviews in 2019.

DEAD RISING

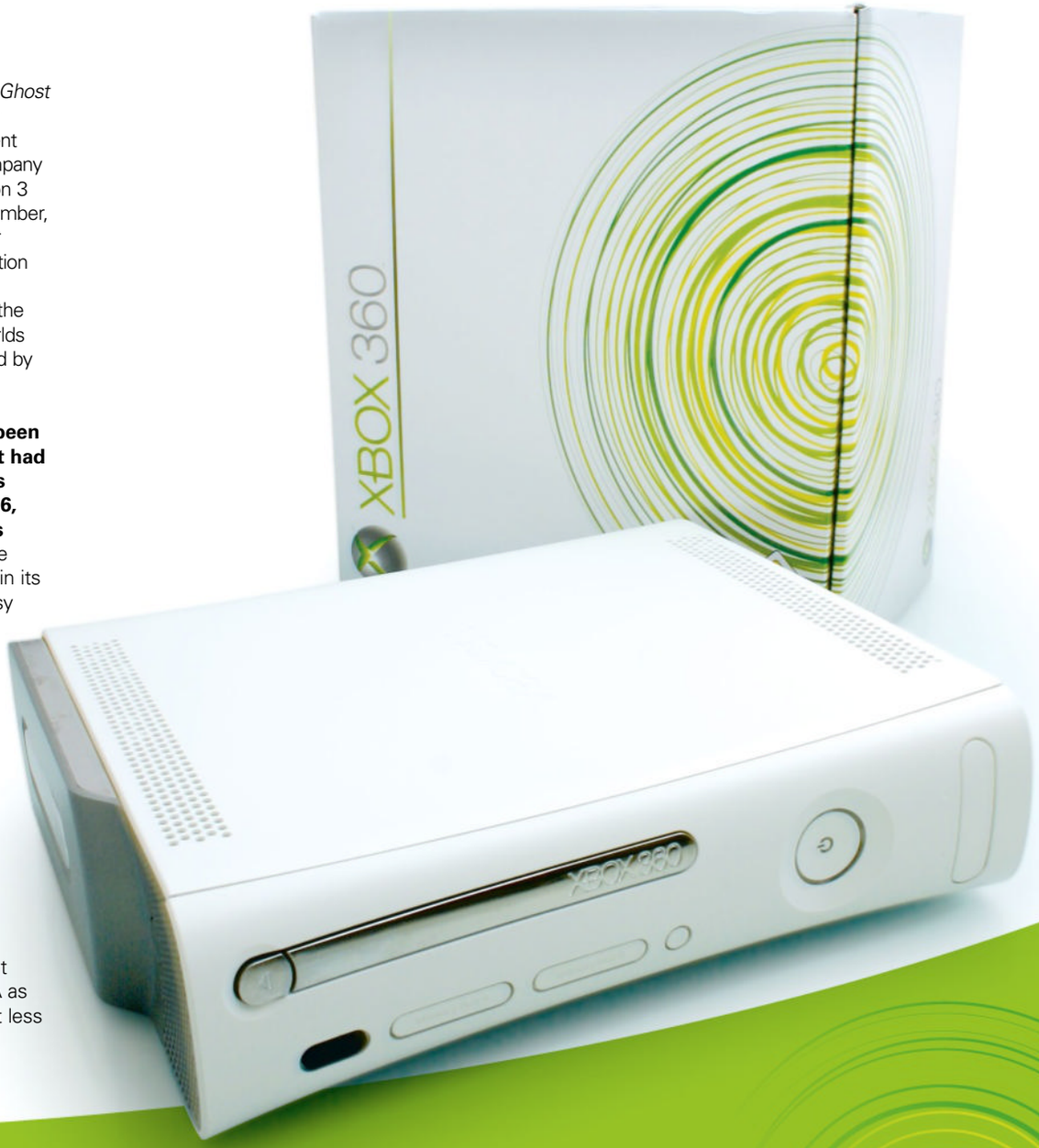
Capcom's homage to *Dawn Of The Dead* offered plenty of amusing ways to ambush amassed ambulatory corpses. *Dead Rising 2* and two downloadable episodes also appeared on the Xbox 360, and two further main games on later platforms. A remaster of the original was released in 2024.



GEARS OF WAR

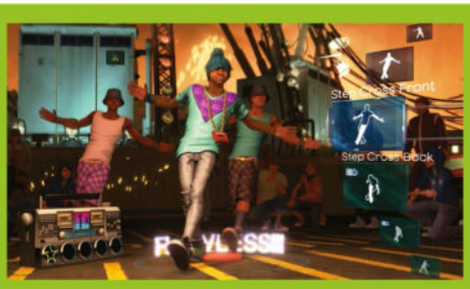
This third-person shooter series is arguably the most recognisable franchise to originate on the Xbox 360, and four games appeared on the console. It's still going strong today – the sixth main instalment, a prequel named *Gears Of War: E-Day*, is scheduled for release in 2026.

Alive 4, Fight Night Round 3, Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter and *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* by then, so that statement felt like desperation from a complacent company caught off-guard. By the time the PlayStation 3 arrived in Japan and North America in November, *Dead Rising*, *Viva Piñata* and *Gears Of War* had joined them. "*Gears* was a stunning action game that made good use of Xbox Live for multiplayer, whilst *Viva Piñata* showed that the 360 was more than capable of creating worlds full of colour and charm, that can be enjoyed by everyone," says Lee.



That early launch had clearly been used effectively, as Microsoft had shipped 10.4 million consoles to retailers by the end of 2006, compared to 1.7 million units of the PlayStation 3. However, one of the reasons that Microsoft was able to maintain its head start was that the Xbox 360 was easy to develop for – a stark contrast to the competition. "Sony, moving from the PS2 to the PS3 era, really pushed the hardware envelope, but that came at a cost," Mike explains. "It forced a lot of teams out of their comfort zones, wrestling with a multi-core architecture that felt alien compared to what came before. It required highly parallelised code which most developers weren't familiar with doing at the time. Microsoft took a different route. By then, most developers were already building PC versions of their games, even if they never shipped them. The Xbox 360 felt familiar. Its development environment was rooted in the same DNA as Windows. For many, that familiarity meant less friction and more focus on creativity." ▶

START ON MICROSOFT'S MOST POPULAR CONSOLE



DANCE CENTRAL

Music game maestro Harmonix created this Kinect-dependent dancing game, which sold in its millions. Two Xbox 360 sequels followed, but with motion controls falling out of favour after *Dance Central Spotlight* arrived on Xbox One, the series moved to Oculus VR devices in 2019.

FORZA HORIZON

Arcade racing is the name of the game in Playground Games' spin-off of Microsoft's flagship racing series. The first two games were released for the Xbox 360, and the sub-series has arguably eclipsed the popularity of the main games in the years since then, with a sixth instalment due in 2026.

SAINTS ROW

While it's fair to say that the first *Saints Row* was a pretty shameless *Grand Theft Auto* imitator, Volition's series soon developed a comedic personality of its own. The first four games and stand-alone expansion *Gat Out Of Hell* are on Xbox 360, with only the 2022 reboot arriving since.

INDEPENDENT SPIRIT

FEW CONSOLES HAVE EVER BEEN AS OPEN TO DEVELOPERS AS THE XBOX 360

While many champion Xbox Live Arcade as one of the best features of the Xbox 360, far fewer mention the Community Games – or Xbox Live Indie Games, as they were later rebranded. These small games developed using Microsoft XNA didn't require formal age ratings or even approval from Microsoft – they were vetted by community members. They could incorporate Avatars but not Achievements, offer a trial period of eight minutes, and could only cost 80, 240 or 400 Microsoft Points.

"While the barrier to entry for XBLA was high, the barrier to entry for XBLIG was virtually nonexistent. And tragically, no one cared," says Ska Studio's founder James Silva. "What XBLIG should have been celebrated for was how well it lowered the bar for hobbyist console development. Never before in history was it so easy for a hobbyist dev to publish a game on a console," he continues. "One consequence of this is that a lot of *incredibly shitty* games launched on XBLIG, and I think that just broke a lot of brains: it was more interesting that the same console that showcased *Forza* and *Gears Of War 2* was now playing a game called *Fart Dating Quiz Massage* than it was that a 16-year-old kid named Bob just released *Dungeons Of Bob,* and now people all over the world could instantly download Bob's first game. When I was 16 I would've murdered for that opportunity."

Despite having already published on XBLA, James released *I MAED A GAM3 W1TH Z0MB1ES 1N IT!!!1* on the Indie Games store, and it became a cult favourite. "I thought it would be a funny joke and was completely blindsided by its success. And it was a totally stealth release, and went viral completely by word of mouth," he recalls. However, developers often complained of poor visibility, and sales could vary wildly – in 2010, developer Todd Snarl told *360* that his platform game *Herman* had sold roughly 30 copies, while the 2011 release *CastleMiner Z* sold 1.5 million copies over about a year and a half.

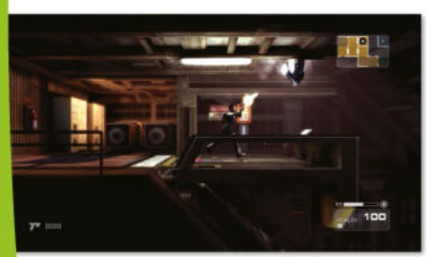
» [Xbox 360] It's the epic song about making a game with zombies in it that does the trick.

» [Xbox 360] Yuzo Koshiro's studio Ancient released *Protect Me Knight* via the Indie Games scheme.

> "IT FELT LIKE THE XBOX 360 WAS SETTING THE TONE FOR THE GENERATION"
> **JON GORDON**

» [Xbox 360] The online marketplace for DLC gave *Rock Band* greater longevity than on last-gen systems.

» [Xbox 360] *Tekken* was built for PS3-based hardware in arcades, but ran admirably on Microsoft's hardware.



» [Xbox 360] Games like *Shadow Complex* really pushed the limits of what XBLA games offered.

"The [Xbox 360] development kits and supporting software are the best I've ever used. The target hardware was fully integrated with Visual Studio's IDE, making it feel like you were debugging a local PC," says Bone, who remembers the difference in similar terms. "The PlayStation 3 was not a great development machine and Sony were in one of their particularly combative periods. Their attitude was you had to be a 'better developer' to deal with their complex architecture, a real opposite to the accessible Xbox environment. The Cell did have advantages, but to unlock them it cost time, effort and money (or maybe just being 'better')." The result of those developmental struggles was that early multi-platform games did not paint the PlayStation 3 in a flattering light, and while developers got better at working with it, differences could be seen for years to come, which didn't help the far more expensive machine. Its online services also paled in comparison to what the Xbox 360 had to offer. So even with the more established brand joining the market, players had plenty of reasons to choose Microsoft's machine going into 2007. Encouraged by hot exclusives like *Crackdown* and *Forza Motorsport 2*, many did just that.

However, reports of unusually high levels of hardware failures – indicated by three red lights around the power button – had been circulating since the launch of the Xbox 360, and 2007 was the year the 'Red Ring Of Death' became too big to ignore. "There was so much paranoia and confusion. Was it an overheating issue? Was there a soldering problem? I remember messing around a lot with wrapping towels around consoles in the hopes of bringing them back to life," recalls Jon Gordon, who was working on the magazine *360* at the time. "This felt like a new problem after years of consoles being a very reliable and stable gaming platform. Reliability was suddenly a concern where it hadn't needed to be before." Microsoft took decisive action in July 2007. In an open letter to customers, Peter Moore announced that all Xbox 360 consoles would be covered for this issue by an enhanced three-year warranty, and that players who had previously paid for repairs would be reimbursed. The company had to budget a whopping $1.15 billion for this repair scheme, but as Moore recalled in a 2015 IGN podcast, he told Microsoft's CEO Steve Ballmer, "If we don't do this, this brand is dead."

The drastic move paid off, giving existing players a reason to stick with the platform, and new players the confidence to buy into it. It was a good job too, because the second half of the year was packed with great games. "Seeing the Xbox 360 embraced by more and more developers and drawing in big names was very exciting," Jon recalls. "Seeing someone like Hironobu Sakaguchi arrive

THE CHANGING FACE OF XBOX 360

HOW SYSTEM SOFTWARE UPDATES OVERHAULED THE HARDWARE'S HOME SCREEN

The Xbox 360 arrived at a time when console manufacturers were beginning to issue regular system software updates, designed to add and improve features as well as make hardware more resilient against piracy. Microsoft's efforts went further though, as the Xbox 360 received various updates that refreshed the look and feel of the console dashboard. The console initially launched with the 'Blades' dashboard, a simple but highly functional 2D interface that Mike Mika loved. "It had this clean, almost tactile quality to it, like flipping through the pages of a book," he explains.

The first and most drastic change came in 2008 when the 'New Xbox Experience' was introduced, replacing the old interface with a 3D cascade of options. Apart from the visual overhaul, the update introduced Avatars, customisable characters to represent your user – much like the Mii characters seen on Wii. "Xbox was already giving users some level of personalisation with the introduction of Gamercards and Gamerscores, so I feel like Avatars complimented this nicely," says Lee Jackson, who worked on the Avatar system. "Upon release, the Avatars offered plenty of customisable features, they were integrated into the Xbox 360 UI, and they started to be used in games. It's easy to dismiss them as a Mii clone, but leaving it at that would be a huge disservice to the hard work that the team put into creating them, and the support they received over the remainder of the Xbox 360's lifespan."

The Avatars were a major part of the Kinect games, and the next dashboard was named after the device – it was a relatively minor refresh, essentially flattening out the New Xbox Experience. The final major image change came with the 'Metro' update, which followed the boxy design language introduced in Windows 8. With it came a proliferation of adverts, for everything from Xbox services to films and even alcoholic drinks – a far cry from the simplicity of the Blades era.

» [Xbox 360] *Batman: Arkham Asylum* was a major third-party hit on the console, and looked great.

» [Xbox 360] *Trials HD* was one of the XBLA games that proved popular among our interviewees.

» [Xbox 360] *Assassin's Creed* was one of the third-party franchises that flourished on Microsoft's console.

with *Lost Odyssey* (and, to a lesser extent, *Blue Dragon*) felt like a massive coup for the console. 2007 as a whole was such a massive year of releases with *Mass Effect*, *BioShock*, *The Orange Box*, *Halo 3* and *Call Of Duty 4* all coming out. It felt like the Xbox 360 was setting the tone for the generation."

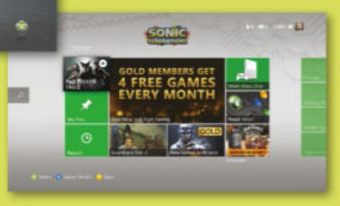
Despite this, the broad appeal of Nintendo's Wii allowed it to overtake the Xbox 360 in worldwide sales late in 2007. At the same time, analysts from Screen Digest and DFC Intelligence separately forecast that the Xbox 360 would fall behind Sony's console globally, in 2008 and 2009 respectively. But the 2007-2008 financial year was the first full year in which Microsoft's entertainment division actually turned a profit, and the format showed no signs of slowing down despite a major worldwide economic downturn. The Xbox 360 actually occupied a sweet spot, offering more power than the Wii at a significantly cheaper price than the PlayStation 3 – the difference often being as much as £100. It also became clear to players that they wouldn't be leaving their favourite games behind if they chose Xbox 360. When Capcom brought the *Devil May Cry* series to Xbox 360 in February of the same year, it marked the first arrival of a big name that was formerly associated with the PlayStation brand, and when *Grand Theft Auto IV* arrived in 2008, it launched simultaneously on both Sony and Microsoft consoles for the first time ever.

Xbox Live was growing in importance in 2008 too. If your friends had already bought into the Xbox 360, you had a powerful incentive to make the same choice to play online with them. A major push into the video streaming market began with the launch of a Netflix app that offered HD streaming, though subscriptions to both Netflix and Xbox Live Gold were required. Microsoft also ran the first Summer Of Arcade promotion that year, highlighting games like *Bionic Commando Rearmed*, *Castle Crashers* and the hit puzzle platformer *Braid*. "Once games like *Geometry Wars* and *Braid* started turning sizeable profits, everything changed. The success caught the attention of large publishers, and suddenly they wanted in," Mike recalls. "2008 felt like the turning point. *Bionic Commando Rearmed* hit from Capcom, we launched *Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix* and *1942: Joint Strike*, and even the Dreamcast port of *Soulcalibur* showed up that year. It was like Xbox Live Arcade had finally grown up – moving from being a curious download service to a genuine platform, a real distribution pipeline for games. For those of us in the thick of it, you could feel the shift happening in real-time."

As the generation wore on, it was clear that Japanese developers had fully bought

» [Xbox 360] The Blades ethos did persist with the page-turning style of the Home button mini-menu.

» [Xbox 360] The Avatars added personality to the system interface, and a new revenue stream for Microsoft.



» [Xbox 360] Here's the Metro interface, giving Jack Daniel's equal prominence to the disc in the console.

» [Xbox 360] The *Call Of Duty* games were multi-million sellers, with *Black Ops* being the peak on 360.

» [Xbox 360] Microsoft took the lion's share of *Skyrim*'s launch sales – 59% were on 360.

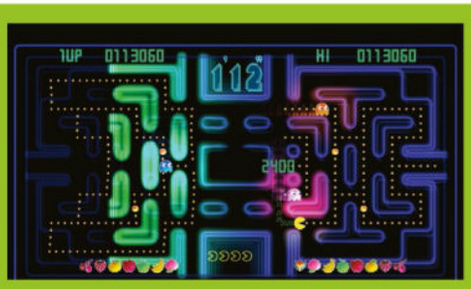
into the Xbox 360. *Resident Evil* and *Tekken* came to Microsoft hardware for the first time, and while *Final Fantasy XIII* may have launched on PlayStation 3 first in Japan, the English language version launched on both platforms simultaneously. Major franchises rolled on, with new instalments of *Halo* and *Gears Of War*, as well as big third-party hits like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. But as the Xbox 360 reached the age at which consoles had traditionally been replaced, it started to muscle in on Nintendo's territory with the addition of motion controls via Kinect. The camera was essentially like a very advanced version of Sony's EyeToy, and became a huge hit – 24 million of them were sold, many in bundles with Xbox 360 hardware, which reached its peak sales in 2010-2011.

Despite its commercial success, today the Kinect suffers from a general apathy towards motion controls. "That generation was an unusually long one compared to console generations past, so the motion gaming boom really extended it out and gave it a few more years of life. In terms of real impact and legacy, however, I don't see a lot of Kinect love out in the world anymore," says Jon. "Personally, I wouldn't consider myself to be part of the intended demographic," concurs Lee, who worked on QA for *Kinect Sports: Season 2*. "Whilst I appreciate Microsoft trying to do something different and ambitious for the time, it never really had any lasting appeal for me. It also felt like it kind of got pigeonholed into being for smaller experiences rather than something like a full-blown single-player adventure." Even so, individual Kinect-dependent titles including *Dance Central* and *Kinect Sports* sold in their millions at the time.

On 22 November 2013, the eighth anniversary of the console's launch, the Xbox 360 was succeeded by the Xbox One. Publishers were still keen to reach as many players as possible, and to that end the Xbox 360 would receive versions of major releases through to the end of 2015, including *Titanfall*, *Destiny*, *Watch Dogs*, *Forza Horizon 2*, *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* and *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*. Releases slowed to a trickle in 2016, with *FIFA 19* and *Just Dance 2019* closing things out in 2018. The Xbox Live Indie Games online store was closed on 7 October 2017 and the Xbox 360's online store as a whole was finally shuttered on 29 July 2024 – though you can still download your previously purchased games at the time of writing.

Unusually, the Xbox 360 was part of a generation in which there was no loser – players got three excellent consoles that received plenty of support. Microsoft managed to ship 84 million consoles by June 2014, making it the manufacturer's most popular console by a comfortable

CLASSIC COMEBACKS MANY PUBLISHERS REVITALISED THEIR



PAC-MAN CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION

Toru Iwatani returned to the arcade hit he created for his final foray into game design, and it was a real treat. It's very much like the original, but you've got five minutes to score as many points as possible inside a maze with regenerating walls and pellets.

SUPER STREET FIGHTER II TURBO HD REMIX

Backbone Entertainment could have just overhauled the graphics and sound for this port, but the team had a more ambitious outlook and aimed to create the ultimate version of the game, implementing tweaks and balance changes.

R-TYPE DIMENSIONS

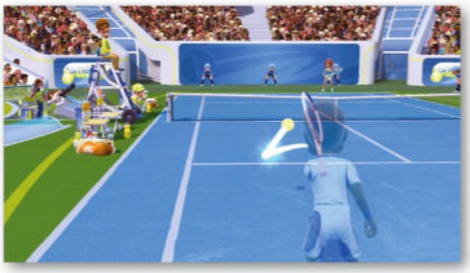
Irem's classic shoot-'em-ups are always a treat, but this downloadable delight didn't just package the first two arcade games together – developer Tozai Games saw fit to give them a 3D revamp, and you could even switch to the 2D visuals with a single button press.

» [Xbox 360] If you doubted the 360's family appeal, *Minecraft* sold a whopping 22 million copies on the console.

» [Xbox 360] Even late into the generation, some multi-platform games like *Bayonetta* ran significantly better on the 360.

» [Xbox 360] *Dance Central* was one of the Kinect games that really hooked casual players in 2010.

» [Xbox 360] Games like *The Simpsons* got their first arcade-perfect home ports via XBLA.



» [Xbox 360] Kinect games were often targeted to a wide audience, and many used the Avatars.

margin. Sony may have lost its position as market leader, but its commitment to the PlayStation 3 did eventually pay off, as the console surpassed its rival in December 2012 and eventually shipped a total of 87.4 million units. Nintendo maintained its overall lead and eventually shipped 101 million Wii consoles, beating both of the more powerful machines. But you'd be forgiven if that picture doesn't match your memories, as the Xbox 360 also claimed some victories late in its life, surpassing Nintendo's motion-controlled phenomenon in the UK in 2013 and the USA in 2014, becoming the top-selling console of the generation in both regions.

> "THE GAMES, NO MATTER THEIR SIZE OR SCOPE, FELT LIKE THEY ALL HAD A PLACE ON THAT SYSTEM"
> **MIKE MIKA**

To date, the Xbox 360 is Microsoft's most popular console, so what did it do right? "I think the success of the Xbox 360 has a lot to do with good timing," says Jon. "That doesn't mean it was luck, but rather the preparation that had been made came off at just the right time. Xbox Live was ready to go and offered a largely stable and well-connected online experience just when developers were ready to really take advantage of that." Mike adds, "The library was varied – a mix of experimental games and blockbuster franchises that somehow coexisted. Then came the Avatars, the Kinect… it all felt so forward-looking, like Microsoft was genuinely trying to imagine what the next decade of play might be. There was an optimism to it. The games, no matter their size or scope, felt like they all had a place on that system."

Indeed, the Xbox 360 is a system that hosted cutting-edge stuff like *Gears Of War*, but gave second chances to games like *Guardian Heroes*. A console where *Halo* and *Call Of Duty* dominate the best-sellers list, that somehow also became a haven for fans of Cave shoot-'em-ups. In many ways, the console was the gateway from the past to the present – a system that introduced HD visuals and turned games like *Rock Band* into platforms for DLC, but still has that classic console immediacy, where you can pop the disc in and go without lengthy installations. The Xbox 360 is still an amazing console 20 years from its launch, so if you've not given yours some love for a while, this anniversary is the perfect time to do it.

RETRO HITS VIA XBOX LIVE ARCADE – HERE ARE SOME OF OUR FAVOURITES

HYDRO THUNDER HURRICANE

Midway Games had ceased to be when this sequel to its arcade speedboat racer arrived, with Vector Unit handling development and Microsoft publishing. The game captures the spirit of the original, with creative courses, all manner of shortcuts to discover and plenty of boost fuel.

SPACE INVADERS: INFINITY GENE

Forget what you know about Taito's classic Seventies shoot-'em-up – this is a fast-paced and stylish take on *Space Invaders* that introduces chain combos, free movement and much more. *Space Invaders Extreme* is also available on the console and well worth checking out too.

HARD CORPS: UPRISING

Konami handed the reins of the *Contra* series to Arc System Works for this run-and-gun, and you can just see that in the sprite work and hear it in Daisuke Ishiwatari's guitar riffs. This one's a brand-new prequel to both *Contra* and the Mega Drive game it's named after.

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ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED

THE INCEPTION, INFLUENCE, AND HISTORY OF THE XBOX 360'S ACHIEVEMENTS SYSTEM

TWENTY YEARS AGO, THE **XBOX 360** INTRODUCED A TANGIBLE WAY TO SHARE YOUR GAMING ACCOMPLISHMENTS WITH THE **ACHIEVEMENTS** SYSTEM. WE LOOK BACK AT HOW IT CAME TO BE AND HOW IT HAS PERMEATED THROUGHOUT THE YEARS, EXPANDING, CHANGING AND INFLUENCING GAMING CULTURE

WORDS BY SOPHIE ULANOFF

Chris Novak, former head of research and design at Xbox, had a major hand in creating the Xbox 360 Achievements system.

Gamerscore millionaire Ray Cox, best known by his Gamertag, Stallion83.

John Cooney, developer of *Achievement Unlocked*, and founder of the studio Wonderful Elephant.

Achievements are not only a part of modern gaming, they're now so intrinsically connected to the gaming experience that when they're found to be absent, some players are perplexed – even disappointed. Of course, 20 years ago, the Achievements system players know today was just being introduced, with the release of the Xbox 360. Nowadays, they're an expectation, an enhancement to the gaming experience, and have even created a culture known as 'Achievement hunting'.

At the time of their inception, the idea was to bolster the social aspect that Xbox Live had introduced; a way for players to show off their accomplishments in gaming. According to Chris Novak, Xbox's design director at the time, Achievements were meant to create a whole new platform for players to experience gaming.

"People wanted to show off the gaming side of their soul, and Achievements were just one part of making that possible," Chris says. As the inception of the Xbox Achievements system came with the launch of rich presence, the overall Gamerscore – there was even a spectator mode intended for launch that was scrapped. Everything in the Xbox 360 launch was meant to work together in order to allow players to show off their gaming personality and create something tangible to reward them for the grind.

Chris mentions an iconic photo featuring a Bizarre Creations [game] that really stuck out at the time when creating the Achievements system and its intention; Jack Black standing in front of his TV, flipping off the camera, with the screen showing he had completed *Project Gotham Racing 2* on Platinum difficulty. The photo was the only way for him to document this accomplishment; Achievements meant that moments like these could be celebrated widely, forever immortalised on a players' profile. "I always thought of that photo when we started talking about the Achievements system for Xbox 360, we needed to capture events people cared about and make it part of their history," Chris says.

> "WE NEEDED TO CAPTURE EVENTS PEOPLE CARED ABOUT AND MAKE IT PART OF THEIR HISTORY"
> **CHRIS NOVAK**

The Xbox 360 Achievements system came with some caveats that stuck; Chris shares that he even sat down and parsed out potential Achievements for original Xbox games, to see how the system would work, and came to the conclusion that a 1,000 Gamerscore potential for each game was a good baseline. This was added to the TCR – Technical Certification Requirements – as well as a limit of 50 Achievements. The 1,000 Gamerscore limit still stands, but even at the time of release, flexibility had to be found when it came to DLC. With both DLC and regular updates being commonplace with gaming

» [Xbox 360] The 'Achievement Unlocked' notification and sound effect became a familiar part of everyday gaming.

» [Xbox 360] *Halo 3*'s map packs added more Achievements, boosting its total Gamerscore to a then-whopping 1,750.

» [Xbox 360] Games with easy Achievements like *Avatar: The Burning Earth* became sought after by Achievement hunters.

today, the 1,000 Gamerscore often gets surpassed after a game's launch.

And of course, the 50 Achievements limit had to go out the window the moment the Achievements system was no longer an Xbox exclusive; Valve followed in its footsteps in 2007, with PlayStation on its tail with its Trophies system in 2008. When asking Chris about the potential of competitors adopting this system, he says "We expected it would be adopted by competitors, and we also knew that it needed to be a consistent experience – within every game – to be most valuable to players," allowing for the smooth transition to a multi-platform experience for Achievements.

While Chris and the team at Xbox expected the competitors to take the system and make it their own, and even the Achievement hunting culture that erupted – "We knew Achievements would provide a new type of treasure map" – no one could have expected the cultural impact it ultimately had. "Today, people say 'Achievement Unlocked' […] seeing that phrase become part of pop culture was humbling and amazing," Chris says.

The influence the Achievements system had on gaming was immediate; suddenly players were playing not only for the love of the game, but for the Achievements as well. At the time of the Xbox 360's launch, one player, Ray Cox – known mainly by his Gamertag, Stallion83 – found himself far more enthralled with the Achievements system than he initially expected.

"I was excited about the Achievements system when I first got my 360. […] It wasn't until I started popping them [Achievements] that I realised it would be a problem. In the best ▶

GIT GUD, BRO

SOME OF THE MOST CHALLENGING XBOX 360 ACHIEVEMENTS

PEGGLE

■ Doctor Of The Peggle Arts requires players to clear every single peg in every Adventure Mode level, of which there are a whopping 55. Only one percent of players on the Achievement tracking website TrueAchievements have earned this one, which rewards you with 30G when completed.

SUPER MEAT BOY

■ Only five percent of TrueAchievements players have earned The Kid, a 45G Achievement for unlocking the guest character, the Kid. This can only be done by fighting through his Warp Zone, which is considered the hardest in a game renowned for its terrifyingly tough platforming challenges.

CLOUDBERRY KINGDOM

■ Just 19 of the 7,254 *Cloudberry Kingdom* players on TrueAchievements have earned Shenanigans!, the 20G reward for completing Chapter 7 of the game. Its difficulty arises from the chapter consisting of 80 dynamic, increasingly challenging levels, with the rules changing from stage to stage.

VANQUISH

■ You'll get the 50G Tactical Challenger reward if you can complete all of the game's Tactical Challenges. Only one percent of *Vanquish* players tracked on TrueAchievements have managed to do so, since these challenge modes are, well, challenging – especially the sixth and final one.

» [Xbox 360] *Crackdown*'s Achievements encouraged fun tricks, like multiple mid-air kills and juggling cars with explosives.

XBOX'S ACHIEVEMENT EVOLUTION

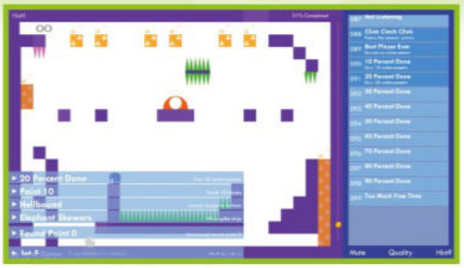
HOW THE SYSTEM MOVED WITH THE TIMES

Xbox Achievements have been pretty consistent over the years, with only minor tweaks to the system. Most notably, base games still provide a potential 1,000 Gamerscore to be earned, as is required by Xbox. At the time of the Xbox 360's release, studios had a maximum of 50 – and a minimum of five – Achievements that could be shipped with the game, but that limit has since increased to 100, with the minimum also doubling to 10. Studios will allot Gamerscore to their Achievements as they see fit, while adhering to an upper limit of 200G per Achievement, until they hit that 1,000 Gamerscore.

Digital games have seen more tweaks – initially, Xbox Live Arcade games were limited to 200G across a maximum of 20 Achievements. That cap was raised to 400G and 30 Achievements in 2012. All games were made subject to the same rules once the Xbox Live Arcade brand was retired with the move to Xbox One. There's also the case of DLC and updates; previously, studios were capped at adding 250G in Achievements per quarter for DLC. Nowadays, Xbox follows a policy of allowing a semi-annual addition of 1,000G and 100 Achievements per game. The biggest change in recent times came with the possibility of earning Xbox Achievements on other consoles, beginning in 2018 with the Switch version of *Minecraft*.

» [Xbox 360] Digital-only releases like *Feeding Frenzy* originally offered a limited Gamerscore compared to packaged games.

» [PlayStation 5] In 2025, *Sea Of Thieves* became the first PS5 game with Xbox Achievements support.



» [PC] John's game *Achievement Unlocked* wasn't intended as a critique, despite appearances to the contrary.

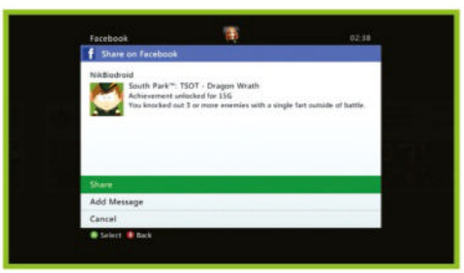
way," Ray says, as his sudden love for that well-known Achievement animation turned into a nine-year journey in which he became the first player to achieve a 1,000,000 Gamerscore.

"It was fall 2008. I was closing in on a quarter million Gamerscore and started wondering how far I wanted to take it. A million popped into my head and it stuck. I started blogging about the goal the next day. I knew it would be one of the most ludicrous goals to achieve in gaming history, and I believe I was right."

While it may have been a "ludicrous" goal, Ray still achieved it in 2014, while streaming on Twitch. *Titanfall*'s I Like A Challenge Achievement tipped his score over the edge, marking a historical moment in the gaming community. "What a moment," Ray says, reminiscing on his accomplishment where he had an audience of 8,000 to witness the moment all his hard work came to fruition. Due to Ray's dedication, Xbox even awarded him a lifetime Xbox Live Gold membership.

When asked what the most challenging Achievement was during this endeavour, Ray mentions the action, gravity-defying, third-person-shooter *Inversion*. "It had this Achievement for doing all the challenges. I think that game took 500 hours. You had to constantly back up your save file because it would corrupt for no reason," he says, stating, "That was a doozy!"

Since Ray's unheard of 1,000,000 Gamerscore success, he's reached 2,000,000 – only four years after earning the initial one million. In today's gaming world, Ray isn't even the world record holder for the highest Gamerscore anymore, with Stephen Rowe – Gamertag smnorv – surpassing Ray in 2021. It's the grind that keeps going, all



» [Xbox 360] Facebook sharing was eventually added for when you got those, erm, particularly memorable Achievements.

» [PC] *The Stanley Parable* wants you to monetise free-to-play. Do you get rewarded for that?

» [Xbox 360] *Dead Or Alive 4* includes a number of 0G Achievements, earned by losing consecutive online matches.

» [Xbox One] Ray finally amassed 1,000,000 Gamerscore with *Titanfall* in 2014, by which time he'd moved on to the next generation.

» [Xbox 360] Every Achievement has a name, a description, a Gamerscore value and a rather fetching icon.

» [Xbox 360] *Game Room*, being a container for many other games, needed rather generic Achievements.

» [Xbox 360] *The Simpsons Game* gives you the Easiest Achievement… ever for pressing Start on the title screen.

thanks to an Achievement system introduced 20 years ago that has allowed players to build upon it generation after generation.

The cultural impact of Achievements went far beyond the players. Devs suddenly found themselves with a new way to implement their creativity, giving Achievements names that were just silly jokes and coming up with the oddest gameplay accomplishments to earn a specific Achievement becoming a staple in games.

One of the most notable devs to take advantage of the Achievements system in the most strange way, was William Pugh, with his walking simulator, virtual existential-crisis, *The Stanley Parable*. Initially a free mod for *Half-Life 2*, *The Stanley Parable* came to consoles, including Xbox One, as *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe*. In between, *The Stanley Parable* arrived on PC with the same title, but as its own game rather than a mod, alongside some interesting Achievements.

Many of those Achievements stayed with the release of Ultra Deluxe, while others were built upon in the most mind-boggling way. Most notably, Super Go Outside is an Achievement that doubles down on Go Outside, featured in the original PC version. Super Go Outside can only be achieved by not playing the game for ten years. *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe* has only been available for three years, which means it'll be seven years before finding out if anyone has managed to achieve this without altering their console or PC's internal clock. Other Achievements, such as Commitment, which asks a player to play the game for the entirety of a Tuesday, or Click On Door 430 Times, which, yes, just requires a player to click on the door 430 times, are all examples of the Achievement system introduced with the Xbox 360 having allowed developers to run with the potential it has allotted them.

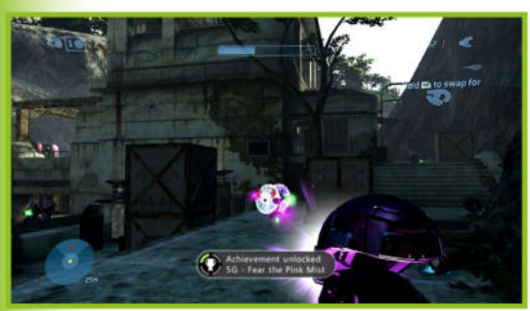
> "I KNEW IT WOULD BE ONE OF THE MOST LUDICROUS GOALS TO ACHIEVE IN GAMING HISTORY, AND I BELIEVE I WAS RIGHT"
> **RAY COX**

While weird and time-consuming Achievements are now possible thanks to the Achievements system introduced 20 years ago, there's also been the notable introduction of rewarding players for simply playing. Due to the Achievements system introducing itself as part of the TCR, studios found themselves needing to fill out an extra box, and sometimes that means players are awarded for simply completing missions in a game's campaign. Chris described it as a "bug" that needed to be fixed for some studios after having just gone through the labour of creating an entire game.

With these types of rewarding-just-for-playing Achievements, some criticism came along with them. Most notably, the flash game known as *Achievement Unlocked* created by developer John Cooney – an extremely popular game where players control an elephant and do

» [Xbox 360] *Quake IV*'s Achievements required extensive online play, so getting 1,000G was a rather daunting task.

» [Xbox 360] You can earn 20G by reversing over the finish line to win in *Sega Rally*.



» [Xbox 360] *Halo 3* offered a then-whopping 1,750 Gamerscore thanks to its map pack expansions.

» [Xbox 360] With just five Achievements on offer, *NBA 2K6* feels pretty stingy by today's standards.

basic actions in order to earn Achievements.

The game was hailed as a commentary on the culture Achievements had introduced. However, John claims he had no intention of making a game that said one thing or another about Achievements. The discourse surrounding Achievements simply inspired John with one idea, "I wondered how many Achievements I could put into a single game. About ten percent of the Achievements were simply rewarding Achievements for how many Achievements were collected," John explains. "Much of this was out of exhaustion, but it also created, 'Achievements for earning Achievements.'"

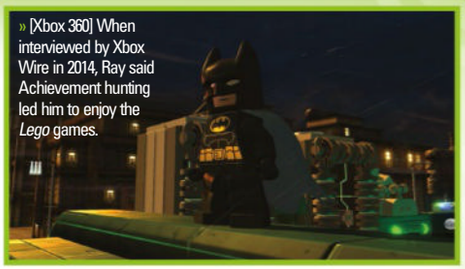
> "ACHIEVEMENTS ALSO BRING DEVS AND PLAYERS CLOSER TOGETHER... ANY POINT WHERE WE CAN BUILD DEEPER RELATIONSHIPS LIKE THIS IS INCREDIBLE"
> **JOHN COONEY**

That exhaustion that John references is the plight Chris himself feels created this exact culture; players receiving Achievements for simply completing the first mission or receiving a weapon the game gives players as part of the story. Still, John was just seeing how far he could take it. The whole reason it was a flash game rather than an Xbox 360 game was because of the 50 Achievement limit. So, *Achievement Unlocked* launched with an absurd number of Achievements, and many of them earned through simple actions such as "walk left, don't walk, jump, pause the game," John says. Critics immediately latched onto *Achievement Unlocked* as a commentary on "meaningless rewards". Of course, John wasn't even aware of this, "When we launched it, the internet loved it, but I didn't really pay attention to WHY they loved it."

John paid attention to that love and created a sequel, *Achievement Unlocked 2*, where he finally realised what his games had done. "This is where the reality check kicked-in. I didn't realise at the time […] of what a statement piece that first game was. I had to go back and read all the posts and comments about that game to really understand why folks got so worked up about it. I was simply running down the rabbit hole of game dev curiosity when I made these games, not trying to challenge Xbox or take a side in the controversy." John even appreciates and celebrates Achievements, despite what critics and players may have interpreted from his early games.

"Achievements also bring devs and players closer together. Rarely do platforms interfere with Achievements, creating more direct lines between players and developers outside the game. Any point where we can build deeper relationships like this is incredible," he says, noting the creativity that Achievements allow devs. This is something that Chris mentions himself. With Achievements, they wanted to provide studios as much free rein as possible while remaining within the confines of the

» [Xbox 360] You'll need to slay 100,000 enemies to earn Seriously 20 in *Gears Of War 2* – best get cracking.



» [Xbox 360] When interviewed by Xbox Wire in 2014, Ray said Achievement hunting led him to enjoy the *Lego* games.

» [Xbox 360] We like it when games reward you for messing up pretty badly, like *Trials HD* does.

TCR. This allowed devs to have fun with the system, a practice that remains to this day, with Achievements even being named after memes, such as *Avowed*'s That Sign Can't Stop Me Because I Can't Read Achievement, or the ridiculous Achievements featured in *The Stanley Parable* as mentioned earlier.

Regardless of what John intended with *Achievement Unlocked*, it hit a nerve in the discussion surrounding Achievements and what should count as such. Today, that type of discourse is scarcely found, with players much more caught up in Achievement hunting and simply blazing through those easy, early Achievements. But with the Xbox 360 creating an entirely new culture, critics were guaranteed to crop up – even unintentional ones such as John.

Over the last 20 years, Achievements and their influence have permeated throughout gaming, altering the experience in a way that players and developers could never go back from. It's hard to imagine gaming today without them, even if there were multiple consoles and computers that already existed prior to their introduction in 2005.

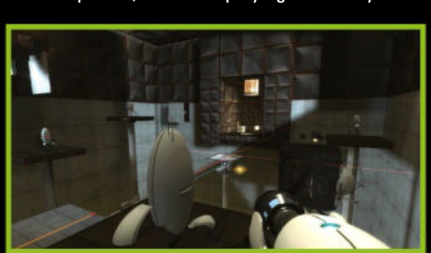
Achievements today are nearly inextricable from gaming – unless players are on a Nintendo system – and this wouldn't be possible without the introduction of the Achievements system 20 years ago with the launch of the Xbox 360. There's a chance that a different platform may have come along and implemented it if Xbox hadn't, but ultimately, Xbox came in first with this culturally defining introduction.

THE SUBSEQUENT INFLUENCE

GAMING WAS NEVER THE SAME AFTER THE XBOX 360'S LAUNCH

The Xbox 360 wasn't alone for long with its Achievements system, with Valve following in its footsteps in 2007, adding Achievements to its own games such as *Team Fortress 2* and *Half-Life 2*. A year later, Sony introduced its own Achievement-based system to the PlayStation 3 with what it called Trophies, almost two years after the console's release. Both Steam and PlayStation grew to have Achievement systems that could match the novelty of the Xbox's, allowing players to hunt for the same Achievements across multiple platforms. With Steam's ever-evolving platform, players can now even include a Completionist Showcase on their profile, which displays games they've earned 100% Achievements in. PlayStation offers a Platinum Trophy for games in which players have earned all other Achievements.

Notably, the other gaming giant that comes to players' minds among these goliaths, Nintendo, never hopped on the bandwagon. While this disappoints some players, it ultimately has never hurt the company in the long-run, despite the 20 years it's had to implement an Achievement system. Players can still benefit from in-game Achievements when playing third-party games on consoles like the Switch and Switch 2, but most first-party games have never provided this feature, leaving Nintendo firmly outside of the Achievement culture.



» [PC] *Portal* was one of the first games to get Steam Achievements, as part of *The Orange Box*.

» [PlayStation 3] *Metal Gear Solid 4* launched before PlayStation Trophies, and only supported them after a patch in 2012.

SCORE 142

Ninku Gaiden: Hiroyuki Daikatsugeki

P-P-P-PICK UP THIS PENGUIN

» GAME GEAR » 1995 » SEGA

Sometimes, it's best not to make things more complicated than they need to be, and I like to think that the existence of *Ninku Gaiden: Hiroyuki Daikatsugeki* is a good example of this. In my mind's eye, someone at Sega saw that the company had obtained a licence for an anime series with a penguin in it, and simply said, "Didn't we do a game with a penguin back in the day?" Then, after swiftly clarifying that they meant *Pengo* and not *Doki Doki Penguin Land*, this spin-off was born. Regardless of whether that's how the game actually came to be, I'm certainly glad it exists because it's a great take on the classic maze game.

Almost all of *Pengo*'s standard mechanics are present – you kick blocks at enemies to squash them, some walls can be kicked to stun nearby enemies and you can arrange diamond blocks in a line for bonus points. The one concession to character is that Hiroyuki can emit foul-smelling farts to momentarily stop enemies in their tracks. However, with immovable blocks and bumpers that can send blocks flying back at you, as well as enemies that can shield themselves and leap over obstacles, it's a far more varied game.

There's even more to it than that, though. After every few regular stages, you'll have to solve a puzzle stage in which blocks have to be arranged into a particular pattern, and then take on a boss fight, some of which can be quite tricky. There's even secret bonus stages and a true final boss to find, adding an extra layer of challenge. How all of this ties into the story of *Ninku*, I have no idea, but the truth is that you simply don't need to be familiar with the source material to appreciate it – all you need is an appreciation of classic arcade game design, and that's something many of us undoubtedly share. ✱

THE MAKING OF Stormbringer

THE FOURTH MAGIC KNIGHT GAME TOOK INSPIRATION FROM A FOLK ROCK ALBUM AND A STAR TREK EPISODE, AND FOR SO MANY YEARS IT SERVED AS THE BUDGET GAME HERO'S SWAN SONG. DAVID JONES RECALLS HOW HE CREATED STORMBRINGER AND TEASES ITS SUCCESSOR

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** MASTERTRONIC
- **DEVELOPER:** DAVID JONES
- **PLATFORM:** SPECTRUM, VARIOUS
- **RELEASED:** 1987
- **GENRE:** ARCADE ADVENTURE

In early 1985 the UK home-computer boom was widely reported to be over; it was also when David Jones debuted his 8-bit protagonist the Magic Knight in the budget platformer *Finders Keepers*. Two arcade adventure sequels followed: firstly *Spellbound*, which was later expanded for the Spectrum 128K, and then *Knight Tyme*, which was designed for the 128K system and then squeezed into its 48K namesake.

David subsequently used his maturing tech, active imagination and the experience he had gained from making *Knight Tyme* to make a sequel that ultimately became known as *Stormbringer*. "I had an engine and lots of ideas for more *Magic Knight* games," David reflects. "I had designed a system to be very flexible so that I could add all sorts of concepts, puzzles and storytelling into it. When I did *Knight Tyme* the idea was that I was writing a brand-new game for the 128K Spectrum and then I would see how much of it I could cram into 48K. But then, because I had done that, I had things set up to write *Stormbringer* for the Spectrum 128K, and I had some idea of how I would reduce things down to get as much as I could into 48K."

> "I HAD THE STORMBRINGER NAME. THEN I THOUGHT OF HAVING A THUNDER CLOUD AND LIGHTNING TO HAVE SOMETHING IN THE GAME THAT RELATED TO IT"
> David Jones

With the design for his new game on a sound technical footing, David thought about names for the latest *Magic Knight* adventure. Then having settled on a suitable option, he worked out how he could tie it to the gameplay he was devising for his project. "At the time I was listening to the John

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

FINDERS KEEPERS
PLATFORM: ZX SPECTRUM, VARIOUS
RELEASED: 1985

SPELLBOUND
PLATFORM: ZX SPECTRUM, VARIOUS
RELEASED: 1985

KNIGHT TYME (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: ZX SPECTRUM, VARIOUS
RELEASED: 1986

» David Jones is making a fifth *Magic Knight* game. He's also an author and a games lecturer at Breda University.

» [ZX Spectrum] The opening screen in *Stormbringer* is typical of the humour found throughout the game.

PERFECT PUZZLES

SOME OF STORMBRINGER'S MOST MEMORABLE CONUNDRUMS

LEVELLING UP

■ You lose energy by moving as well as by walking into hazards, so look for bottles of energy drink. Wearing the Ankh raises your energy to 60 if it drops to zero, and wearing the Talisman keeps your magic high.

CUNNING DISGUISES

■ The newspaper in *Stormbringer* has a job ad for either a footman, guard, wizard, chambermaid, white witch or warrior. You have to disguise the Magic Knight as the character in the advert to get into the castle.

TRICKY TELEPORTER

■ You first get a code from Rachel and convert it to seven digit binary. You then look for levers in seven sequential rooms and pull those that correspond to a '1' in the binary. Doing so repairs the teleporter.

BESTING BEARWOOLF

■ There's an arrow near a statue that you give to Robin Of Shylock and an Elf Horn that you use to call him to your side. If you use the horn while standing next to Bearwoolf then Robin kills him with the arrow.

& Beverley Martyn album *Stormbringer*, and I quite liked that," David enthuses. "So I had the *Stormbringer* name, and I thought that would work. Then I thought of having a thunder cloud and lightning to have something in the game that related to it. It wasn't much of a storm, it was just one cloud moving backwards and forwards. You couldn't have rolling clouds on the Spectrum that got darker because you had limited colours and limited animation. I also didn't like the idea of players leaving the game alone and nothing happening, because it felt a bit boring to me."

Far from boring, *Stormbringer*'s thunder cloud appeared and struck the Magic Knight with lightning if he stood still long enough. To explain its malevolence, David created the Off-White Knight and made the storm his doing. The villain and the follow-up's teleporters both took inspiration from classic sci-fi. "There was a *Star Trek* episode called *The Enemy Within* where there was a transporter accident," David recollects. "Captain Kirk came back from a planet and stepped off the transporter pad, then a bit later another Captain Kirk that had an evil grin appeared on the pad. The good Captain Kirk couldn't make hard decisions, and the evil version was too evil. Neither of them was complete without the other, and they had to merge them. I thought that was a nice idea, so I thought I'd have a go at something like that. That was a starting point for the Off-White Knight, and how the game would be completed. The teleporters in *Stormbringer* were there to help me test the game, and also to avoid getting players to go all the way over *there* to get *this* object and then come all the way back *here* to use it."

» [ZX Spectrum] You need to trade various items with Robin Of Shylock in order to beat *Stormbringer*.

As well as not using this much-maligned mechanic, David further ensured that the adventuring that featured in *Stormbringer* was kept interesting by incorporating platforming and moving hazards. This was all the more notable as it was something *Stormbringer*'s predecessor was light on. "I always referred to the *Magic Knight* games as arcade adventures; *Finders Keepers* was almost like a prequel," David qualifies. "Although *Knight Tyme* was my favourite of the three Windimation games, I had fewer arcadey elements in it than I had in *Spellbound*. So I rebalanced that a little bit in *Stormbringer*. I was just seeing what I could do with more of those elements, and it seemed to work."

» [ZX Spectrum] You risk getting struck by lightning if you hang around *Stormbringer*'s outdoor locations.

» [ZX Spectrum] As with the earlier games, you can stand on the advert in *Stormbringer* to reach high-up items.

» [ZX Spectrum] Unlike its predecessor *Spellbound*, *Stormbringer* has platforming and deadly objects to deal with.

» [ZX Spectrum] This lethal obstacle course of a screen provides *Stormbringer* with a purely arcade challenge.

» [ZX Spectrum 128K] The Spectrum 128K *Stormbringer* has extra locations that contain additional puzzles.

» [ZX Spectrum 128K] The route to Bearwoolf's hoard is an old-school pixel-perfect platforming challenge.

Another aspect of *Stormbringer* that differed from *Knight Tyme* came in the form of sequences of similar rooms: one platforming-based and another puzzle-based. The latter required timing to overcome and was designed to make players doubt whether travelling through its almost identical locations was a good idea. "The one-way corridors looked a bit too similar, so I gave them numbers," David reasons. "The idea of having four of them was that you had to go so far and then pull a lever. I think my main thought was that it would make players have to do some work to get to the next section, because it would be a bit of a challenge. I think I was also adding a bit of satire, because in text adventures you could often go north infinitely. So by having a sequence of one-way corridors the player would begin to wonder if there was an infinite series of them!"

Like the earlier *Magic Knight* adventures, *Stormbringer* gave players various spells that they could cast. Aside from an incantation to quit the game, all the spells in David's latest project were new. Two of them channelled a role-playing game and another was just for fun. "The Pass Plant spell was a variation on a *D&D* Druid spell where you could step into a tree and step out of another one," David acknowledges. "The Melt Granite spell was a red herring! It sounded interesting because you thought you were going to get to melt some granite, but hopefully by the time players realised that they didn't have to they had enjoyed the game anyway. I think the Spell Of Wonder was from *D&D* again, because it has spells that increase

SUPERB SPELLS

THE ENCHANTMENTS YOU NEED TO BEAT STORMBRINGER

PASS PLANT

■ This handy spell sends the Magic Knight from a flower to the power plant and back again. You find the Elf Horn in the power plant, but as this location drains the knight's energy you need to get him out quick.

SPELL OF WONDER

■ Perhaps not as wonderful as its name suggests, this incantation increases the knight's strength a bit while draining his magic. Since many of the actions in the game require magic this isn't a great trade off.

MAGIC FULCRUM

■ Pulling the correct levers to repair the teleporter isn't as easy as it sounds. If you make a mess of it then you always have the option of using the Magic Fulcrum spell, which instantly resets all the levers.

DIMENSION MERGE

■ The Dimension Merge spell merges the Magic Knight with his evil opponent in order to defeat him. You have to stand in front of him in disguise, remove the disguise and then cast the spell before he kills you.

your stats, but cost you something else. Then Quiticus Gamus would just restart the game rather than you having to carry on until you died."

Since *Stormbringer* was intended for the 48K and 128K Spectrums, once David finished developing for the more advanced system he then had to produce a scaled-back version. This meant taking out locations, puzzles and items, and doing so required some reworking of the content that was left. "The process of stripping back the 128K *Stormbringer* to fit into 48K was quite involved," David remembers. "In some cases if a puzzle was connected to a character that wasn't there anymore I'd either get rid of it or change the person that you needed for the puzzle. If a location was no longer there and you needed something from it then I'd either get rid of the puzzle connected to that item or change the puzzle to rely on a different item. Then in some cases I thought about what I could put in the place of a puzzle I had taken out to keep the player entertained."

> "THE PASS PLANT SPELL WAS A VARIATION ON A D&D DRUID SPELL WHERE YOU COULD STEP INTO A TREE AND STEP OUT OF ANOTHER ONE"
> David Jones

Once he had *Stormbringer* ready for both Spectrum models, David's reward was positive magazine reviews and sales to reflect those plaudits. Nevertheless, a fifth *Magic Knight* game wasn't on his agenda. *Stormbringer* had been a long development and he was reconsidering his relationship with his publisher. "I took as long as I did on *Stormbringer* because Mastertronic was changing as the Spectrum was starting to fade," David explains. "It was also because Mastertronic had paid me upfront for its development, so there was no financial stress to work harder or faster. It was great at the end when I finished *Stormbringer*, but I had lost interest in working for Mastertronic. I was looking around thinking about what I should do next. Arguably I could have said that the Magic Knight was mine and taken him to another company, but that didn't really feel right. If I thought of doing that at all then it was only briefly."

Despite David's feelings at the time, a follow-up to *Stormbringer* is now finally taking shape. Presently codenamed *Magic Knight 5*, this latest follow-up honours the games that came before it while taking advantage of modern-day hardware to introduce features that 8-bit computers would baulk at. "*Magic Knight 5* is a 2D scrolling side-on adventure like the original games, but I've got three layers so that you can walk into the screen and back out again," David notes. "There are platforms and Windimation, but there are going to be animated pictures of the characters you meet that you can select from. Then when you're picking up objects the game will show you a grid of objects that are nearby. I've got most of the puzzles done, and I've got the main theme for why the Magic Knight is where he is and why characters from previous games have turned up. So story-wise and code-wise it's mostly finished."

On *Magic Knight 5*'s predecessor *Stormbringer*, David candidly admits to having gained a fresh appreciation of an arcade adventure that he now believes he has been undervaluing. So much so that he plans to revisit *Stormbringer* to remind himself of its sprawling world and intriguing puzzles. "It's interesting because I haven't really given it a lot of thought, but some of the things you've reminded me were in *Stormbringer* make me think that it actually sounds a lot more fun than I thought it was," David concedes. "Prior to us talking I would have said it was an also ran, largely because at the time I was getting frustrated with the changes at Mastertronic and I knew the series wouldn't last much longer because the Spectrum was fading away. But I'm going to have a playthrough of *Stormbringer*, or sit and watch a YouTube playthrough of it, and I'm looking forward to that." ✱

» [ZX Spectrum 128K] *Stormbringer* continues the *Magic Knight* tradition of incorporating items that are red herrings.

» [PC] Perhaps the red herring in the upcoming *Magic Knight 5* is useful.

» [Amstrad CPC] Hiro makes a dramatic entrance, dropping in from above.

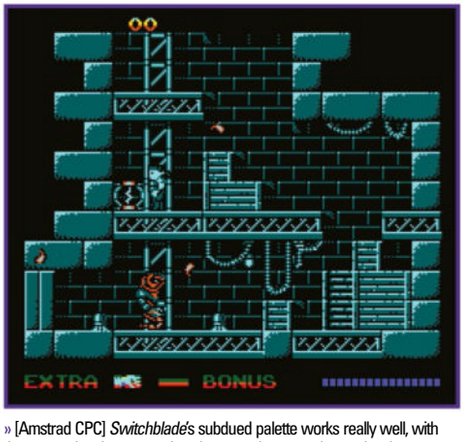
AMSTRAD ACTION #70

EASILY OVERLOOKED, THE AMSTRAD CPC WAS A CAPABLE MACHINE WITH MANY GREAT GAMES AND ITS OWN, UNIQUE VERSIONS OF CLASSIC HITS. THIS MONTH'S COVERMOUNT CORNER SHOWCASES WHAT IT COULD DO, FEATURING A DEMO OF ONE OF ITS BEST GAMES AND SEVERAL OTHER GOODIES

WORDS BY JAMES KONIK

THIS MONTH IN JULY 1991

The Amstrad CPC brand was struggling in 1991. Attempts to refresh it with the Plus models had failed. Amstrad had also made a brave stab at entering the console market with the GX4000, but it was not to be and the curtains were closing. Great games kept coming though, and the Amstrad was still getting unique versions of top titles, with covertapes presenting them to eager readers. This month's *Amstrad Action* tape includes a demo of the fantastic *Switchblade*, along with the complete *Future Knight*, as well as an excellent reader game and a demo of a cloned arcade classic.



» [Amstrad CPC] *Switchblade*'s subdued palette works really well, with the orange leaping out against the not-quite monochrome levels.

THE MAIN EVENT: SWITCHBLADE DEMO

With its anime stylings, bandana-clad hero and tense combat, *Switchblade* seemed effortlessly cool in 1991. It oozed quality, but despite the aesthetic, *Switchblade* was created in Derby by Core Design, which was churning out strong characters long before Lara Croft appeared. The Amstrad version was courtesy of Sheffield's finest, Gremlin, with James North-Hearn describing it as "slightly better" than its 16-bit Atari ST cousin.

An excellent intro, highly elaborate for an 8-bit game, sets up the plot. Hiro, the last of the Bladeknights has to rebuild the shattered Fireblade and bring the dawn, saving the world from the evil Havok.

What that amounts to is picking your way through a tight action platformer, with fierce enemies and deadly traps. Initially, dropped in from above, you're left to infiltrate the compound, and hunt the sword fragments you need. Find a route forward and new parts of the screen appear from the dark. It's cool, classy and handily sidesteps the need for scrolling. The game has an unusual aesthetic, resembling monochrome, but with colour used to add highlights and to pick out enemies and major items, which pop from the backgrounds.

It also has a clever one-button control system where you hold the fire button to charge kicks, punches and sweeps. Enemies

teleport in, often surprising you and hidden spikes are waiting, so you need to inch through the screens with care.

Like the best demos, it ends much too soon, with its few screens running out just as you're getting to grips with the controls. Ultimately, it was a great ad for the monstrous 128-screen full game. *Amstrad Action* loved it, giving it 94% on console and 90% for the tape edition.

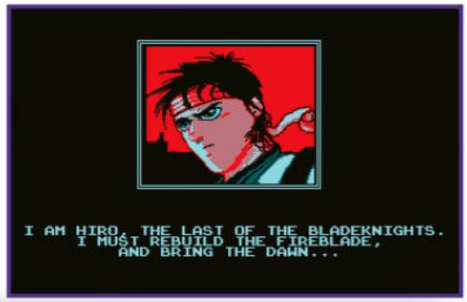
PLAY THIS NEXT: FUTURE KNIGHT

Along with *Switchblade*, Gremlin also supplied a full game to tape. *Future Knight* is a flip-screen platformer with a score by the late Ben Daglish. It blends sci-fi and fantasy as you play the brave knight Randolph exploring a crashed spaceship on his mission to rescue princess Amelia from the evil Spegbott The Terrible.

There are weapons and items to find, but with just one inventory slot it's all about figuring out the best route from each object to the puzzle it solves without losing too much health. Respawning baddies harangue you, and there are some beefier enemies too, such as giant robots and springs, for you to take down on your quest. ✱

» [Amstrad CPC] This spring-propelled robot stands in the way of a very important key.

» [Amstrad CPC] Randolph, the Future Knight, will give you a little wave if he thinks you've abandoned him.



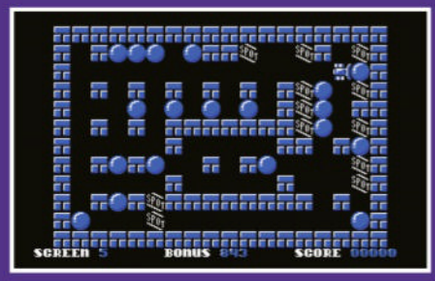
Covermount HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST OF THE REST

BALLDOZER

■ *Balldozer* is a *Sokoban* game by New Zealand reader Jeroen Erkens, who also contributed a *Connect Four* game the following year. Rather than crates, you're tasked with pushing crystal balls around a miniature tower to earn yourself a part-time job at Merlin's magic shop. *Balldozer* has two graphics modes which look very different, but keep the same gameplay, with the colourful lo-res Mode 0 looking far more cheerful than the mostly blue Mode 1.

If you back yourself into a corner, there's a handy undo function, plus a restart if it all gets too much. There's also a bonus counter, giving you an incentive to solve puzzles efficiently for a higher score. All in all, it's a very solid, enjoyable reader game.



MEGA PHOENIX DEMO

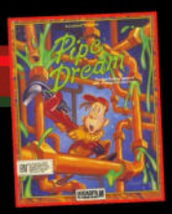
■ *Mega Phoenix* is a *Phoenix* clone with upbeat music and strong gameplay. You blast through waves of enemies, before taking on the boss ship. The small demo only lets you play the first two stages, both styled on *Galaga*, which is enough to give you a taste. Curiously, you sometimes start with power-ups if you play it more than once. The full game didn't last much longer. It scored 42% in the next issue of *Amstrad Action*, though the only real problem was its length – you can finish it on your first go in under three minutes. It's certainly fun while it lasts though.

Coded by Dinamic, the Spanish developer regularly worked with Gremlin and also created *Army Moves*, *Game Over* and the excellent *West Bank*.

THE MAKING OF Pipe mania

CREATING A WINNING PUZZLE GAME WAS NO PIPE DREAM FOR THE ASSEMBLY LINE. ALL IT TOOK WAS A FLOW OF IDEAS AND THE INPUT OF SOME WISE MASTERS IN A RANCH FAR, FAR AWAY TO PRODUCE A GAME THAT HAS MORE THAN STOOD THE TEST OF TIME

WORDS BY DAVID CROOKES



IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** EMPIRE INTERACTIVE/ LUCASFILM GAMES
- **DEVELOPER:** THE ASSEMBLY LINE
- **PLATFORM:** AMIGA, VARIOUS
- **RELEASED:** 1989
- **GENRE:** PUZZLE

Ask many gamers to name the most iconic puzzle games of all time and *Tetris* would likely come out top. Created by Alexey Pajitnov, it not only heavily influenced the puzzle genre, it demonstrated to developers and publishers just how lucrative such games could be.

Among the titles that followed in *Tetris*' wake was *Pipe Mania* and few players realise just how much the Russian classic influenced its design. Developed by The Assembly Line in 1989, the game took the core concept of fitting pieces together under pressure, albeit with a fresh twist – one that turned it into a major hit.

When two of The Assembly Line's cofounders, John Dale and Martin Day, began producing the game, however, they didn't imagine it would have resonated with players to such an extent. "The idea that a conceptually simple puzzle game could do well was in the air," John explains. "And we were looking for something that would be quick and easy to code." The pair had begun working on the game around the same time as the company was being set up and the idea was that players would be presented with a set of pieces that they would lay on a grid in some sort of order against the clock. Once a player had done this, their efforts would be tested – if the pieces were not laid correctly, there would be a consequence.

"I think at one stage there was a thought that it might be trains you were trying to get to a station [by laying tracks]," John says, but this idea was shelved in favour of asking players to assume the role of a plumber and lay pipes. "Perhaps there were other games that involved trains at the same time," John adds. And so the concept began to grow.

The initial idea was to get gamers to lay pipes as quickly as possible and then, when the time was up, allow a liquid to flow. If the player had laid a sufficient number of pipes without spilling a drop, they'd get to progress to the next level. "When the

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

INTERPHASE

PLATFORM: AMIGA, ATARI ST, DOS

RELEASED: 1989

XENON 2: MEGABLAST (PICTURED)

PLATFORM: MEGA DRIVE, VARIOUS

RELEASED: 1991

CYBERCON III

PLATFORM: AMIGA, ATARI ST, DOS

RELEASED: 1991

timer ran out and the liquid started flowing, you could no longer add new pieces to the playfield," John explains. "You just had to watch the liquid flow and hope that you'd put down enough pieces already."

The game was also due to use entirely random tiles and the developers decided players would have two sets of them, just to spice things up a bit. "In the original version of the game, a single player had two alternate sets of tiles to choose from, a red set and a blue set," John says. "The player got more points for using a run of one colour or the other, but fewer points for flipping between the two sets."

> "WE DID EVERYTHING IN JUST A FEW MONTHS, SO IT WAS BASICALLY A SPRINT FOR THE WHOLE PROJECT"
> **STEPHEN BUTLER**

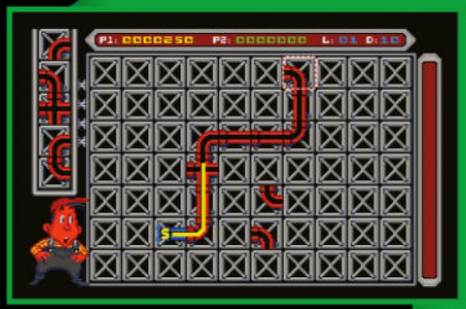
As development progressed on the Amiga and Atari ST, however, with simple abstract tiles being used for the pipes and background, a problem began to emerge. The developers found that if the tiles presented to players were entirely random, some puzzles could suffer if the pipes were insufficiently varied. Similarly, if players struck lucky, they may find themselves with an ideal set of pipes, making a puzzle too easy.

To fix this, John and Martin worked on creating lists of eight or 16 tiles, getting the program to pick a list, work through them and then move on to another list. It made the tile selection semi-random and gave the programmers more control. They were also able to determine the number of specific pieces available in later levels which enabled them to keep earlier levels easy and allow later ones to become more difficult. This was also helped by some relatively straightforward coding. "I'm fairly sure we had a simple set of numerical values that defined each level: time to flow starting, initial flow speed, flow acceleration, number of obstacles, tile distribution and so on," says John. "So making each new level just a bit harder than the previous one was just a question of [increasing] one or more of those values. That made it fairly easy to generate a difficulty curve that everyone seemed to like."

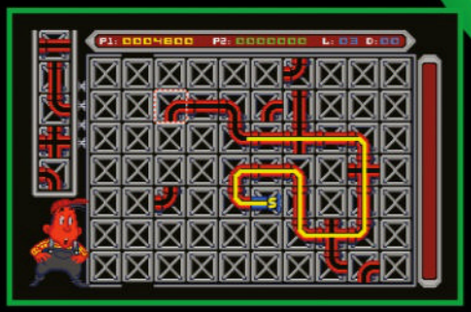
By this stage, the developers were sure they were onto something. "Once we had a working version, I tried it out on a few of my friends, and was pleasantly surprised at how enthusiastic they were," John says. "That gave us some confidence that it was worth persevering with."

This hunch was confirmed when the game was taken on by Empire Interactive, a relatively new company founded in London in 1987 by Ian Higgins and Simon Jeffrey. The publisher also saw great potential in *Pipe Mania* so it approached Lucasfilm Games with a view to licensing it in the United States.

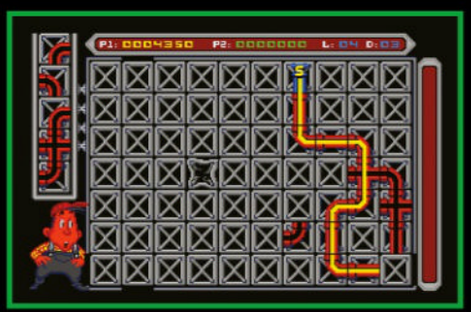
It wasn't long before the game was crossing the desk of AJ Redmer. "I was head of product development at Lucasfilm Games at the time," says AJ. "I oversaw the development of the internal studio games and the external games that licensed Lucasfilm IP. I also worked with a handful of external developers building games based on Lucas IP."



» [Amiga] Flooze quickly starts to flow from the starter square so you need to ensure you have laid a sufficient number of pieces.



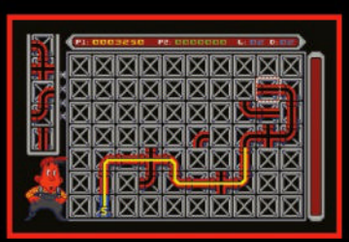
» [Amiga] *Pipe Mania* was a difficult enough game which is why Lucasfilm Games requested reducing the number of complexities.



» [Amiga] By keeping the pipework tight, you can make better use of the entire grid and rack up those points.

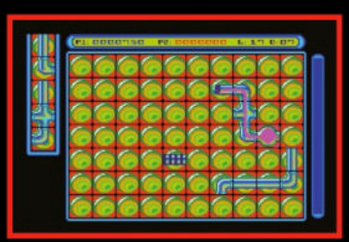
MASTER PIPE MANIA

KEEP THE FLOOZE FLOWING WITH THESE HANDY TIPS



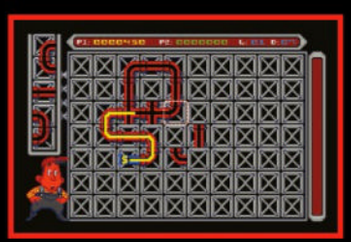
THINK AND PLAN

■ You can't simply look at the bottom tile when considering where to place pipes on the grid. You need to quickly scan all of the pieces in the dispenser and work out where they likely best fit. It's inevitable you'll end up with gaps while you wait for suitable pieces to fill them.



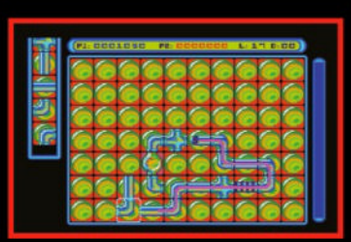
MAKE USE OF RESERVOIRS

■ On later levels, the game becomes much more interesting and you'll come across features such as reservoirs. When the Flooze flows, you'll find these reservoirs take longer to fill up so use them asp to buy yourself some time if – and when – things start to get a little frantic.



LOOP BACK ON YOURSELF

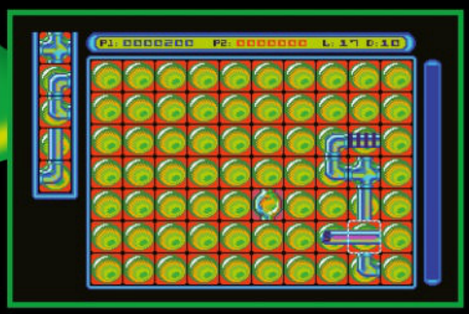
■ Using bonus or reservoir pieces helps to boost your score but if you want to hurtle up the leaderboard, get looping. You get 500 points whenever the Flooze crosses itself so you need to cleverly use your limited number of cross pipes by leaving sufficient room around them.



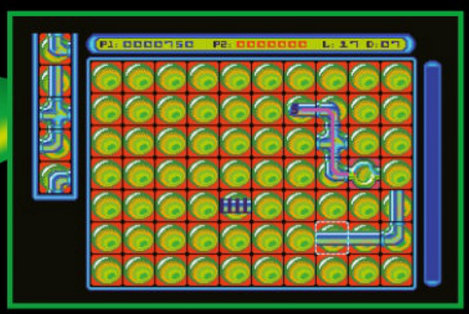
DON'T BOMB YOUR PIECES AWAY

■ Try to avoid destroying pieces you've already laid – you lose points and, more importantly, time. You can do this by paying attention: don't accidentally lay one-way pieces against the direction of flow and don't trap yourself by pushing close to obstacles. Try to stay calm too!

» [Amiga] Can you knock *Pipe Mania* designer John Dale off the top? We've got a way to go.



» [Amiga] The Flooze is flowing and the pipework is atrocious due to a deviously placed start point.



» [Amiga] This is a game which requires a lot of speed and forward planning.

Pipe Mania, AJ adds, was "a bit of a one off for us and I don't recall exactly how I was introduced to Empire Interactive". But AJ travelled to England to meet with Empire and he was very enthused. "I saw potential in *Pipe Mania* because it followed the same math principle as *Tetris*. But I also saw that it needed work."

With a deal struck – "I think it was Doug Glen, the marketing director, who licensed the game," AJ says – such work was handed to producer Stephan Butler. "He became the associate producer on our end," AJ continues, and from this point on, a series of changes were made which would prove to be rather significant, changing the look and feel of the game. "We just needed to fine-tune some gameplay characteristics," Stephan says. And, as John agrees, the tweaks turned a promising game into a classic.

> "I INVITED THE ASSEMBLY LINE GUYS TO THE SKYWALKER RANCH TO COLLABORATE ON THE DESIGN"
> **AJ REDMER**

The two teams – Lucasfilm Games and The Assembly Line – worked closely together. "I invited The Assembly Line guys to the Skywalker Ranch to collaborate on the design," AJ says. One of the first decisions was to allow players to continue adding pipe pieces when the liquid – called Flooze – was flowing. "I saw it as a real-time game like *Tetris* and not turn-based the way they did," AJ says.

This decision helped to increase the overall tension by allowing gamers to frantically backtrack on mistakes and continue laying pieces to prevent the Flooze from spilling out of the end of the pipe. "Lucasfilm Games' suggestion that you should be able to carry on adding pieces worked much better," John admits, calling the original decision "ridiculous, with hindsight".

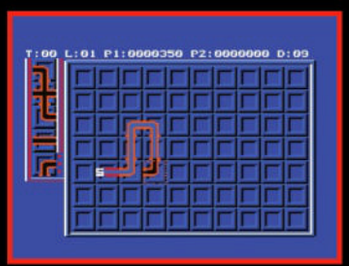
Lucasfilm Games also introduced a host of new features such as obstacles and one-way pipes, and it suggested ditching the two alternate, red/blue sets of tiles. "Lucasfilm, correctly I think, thought that this was an unnecessary complication and that the game would work better with a single stack of upcoming tiles," John says.

Pipe Mania's graphics were overhauled too. "They were not very impressive so we went with a more cartoon-like look," says Stephan. John was greatly impressed with the changes being made. "Lucasfilm Games came up with the idea of themes and provided artwork for each one, all of which was much better than our original work," John adds. "I spent some time at Skywalker Ranch working on the game with them, and full credit, their input hugely improved the original concept."

But why was the *Tetris* link stronger than many imagined? Well, Alexey helped drive some of the changes. Although he tells **Retro Gamer**, "I wasn't involved in the original design." He'd actually been working with AJ on general game concepts. "We'd worked on a lot of '*Tris* games with Spectrum Holobyte," AJ explains. "From my end, the fundamentals of *Tetris* principles influenced the design the most, and Alexey and I had deep conversations about them before *Pipe Mania* came along."

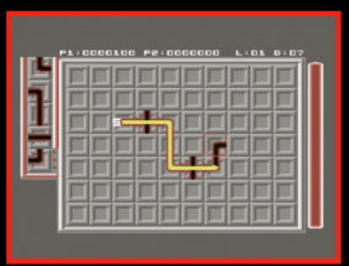
CONVERSION CAPERS

PIPE MANIA HAS APPEARED ON LOADS OF PLATFORMS, HERE ARE JUST A FEW OF THEM



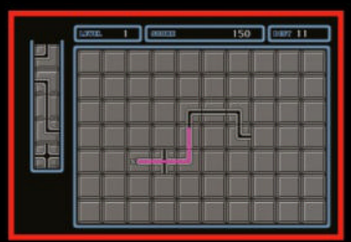
AMSTRAD CPC

Although it looked a tad drab, *Pipe Mania* lost none of its charm on the 8-bits in general. With plenty of levels (36), this CPC version included a host of features ranging from subgames and score-boosters to two-player head-to-heads and collaborations.



COMMODORE 64

Programmed by Adrian Sheppard, this version didn't make great use of the SID chip and it suffered from a bit of lag. Still, it was a nicely presented port thanks to graphics by Kevin R Eyre and it boasted some pleasant animations and a fun two-player mode.

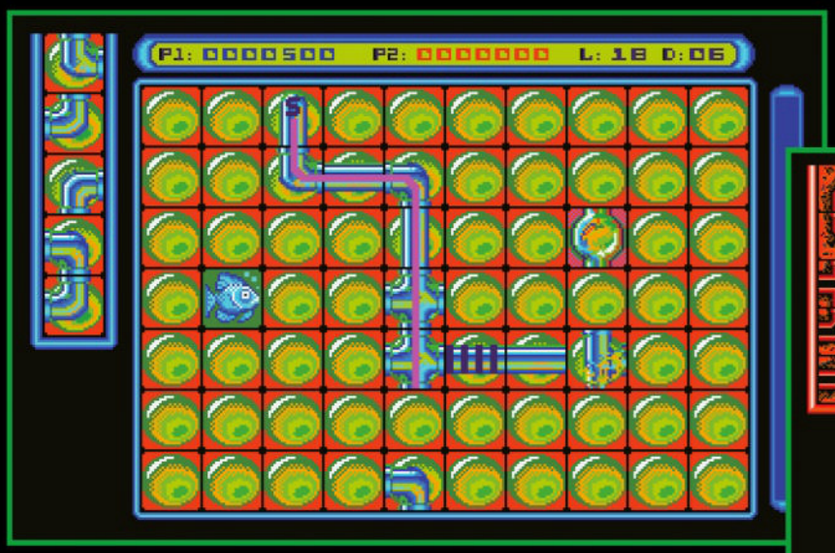


MAC

This port, with its blue-pink combo, wasn't much to look at but it was still fast, fluid and fun, neatly playing in a window for a quick sesh. "I was pleased with the Mac version," says AJ Redmer. "It was programmed by one of my engineers, Eric Johnson."

ARCADE

Released in the arcades by Japan's Video System Co Ltd, this stunningly attractive rendition had, from the beginning, start and end points which needed to be joined by pipes. "The coin-op version was the top game in Japan and Asia for about three months," AJ tells us.



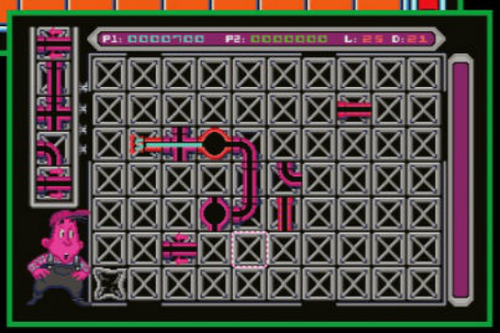
» [Amiga] Such cute-looking fish couldn't possibly pose a problem, could they? Yup! You need to go around them.

Such hard-thinking permeated the game's development at this stage as the team sought to refine the game's pace and balance. But with everyone onboard with the changes and, as AJ points out, little to no tension regarding any of the decisions being made, the process proved easy and enjoyable. John got on with creating the game's music, tweaking it to match the cartoon look of the game and there was even time for Stephan to work on copy protection. "His biggest contribution to the game was the code wheel," AJ says, of the method used to prove people had purchased the game.

What's more, all of this was achieved in a short amount of time. "We did everything in just a few months, so it was basically a sprint for the whole project," Stephan says. Even so, the game required a lot of testing primarily because of one particularly random aspect of the game – the inability to determine where a player would place a piece. "We just kept playing and playing and playing," Stephan says. "We had several all-nighters trying to max every level and all the ideas of how to make it more interesting came from those sessions."

Lucasfilm Games changed the name to *Pipe Dream* for the US market and the game was ported to virtually every platform at the time. This was probably the hardest part of the production. 'It was challenging to bring all platforms up at the same time," Stephan says. "But it was more about communication and consistency than any coding breakthrough."

Still, in talking to those who worked on the game, it's clear they had much fun. "The working environment was 100% first class," Stephan says. John certainly loved the process as well. "It was probably the best experience I had in game development," he says. "It was easy to develop, we sold it almost immediately, collaborating with Lucasfilm was a joy, and it made a reasonable amount of money for us, especially if you were to measure it in terms of return on hours spent." Who would have thought a game focussing on plumbing could work so well? ✱

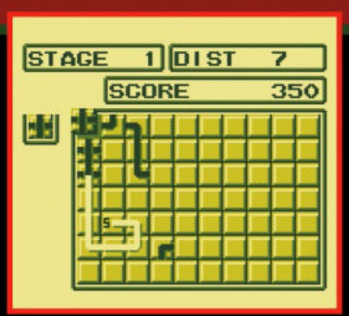


» [Amiga] An important change was allowing pieces to be laid while the Flooze was flowing, making for a race against time.

» [Amiga] There are various themes throughout the game – these were introduced by Lucasfilm Games.

NES

■ Ported by Bullet-Proof Software, this excellent, cleanly presented version was, according to AJ, developed with the aid of Sculptured Software's NES emulator. Released exclusively in North America, it played on a slightly larger grid than the original Amiga version.

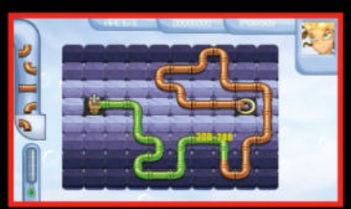


GAME BOY

■ AJ Redmer, Alexey Pajitnov, Vladimir Pokhilko and programmer Bob Rutherford developed this strong, immensely playable handheld conversion as Bullet-Proof Software. "We went to Hawaii to develop the game in a building directly on the beach in Lanikai," AJ says.

PC (WINDOWS 3.1)

■ Bundled as part of the *Best Of Microsoft Entertainment Pack*, the game's arrival on Windows hardly set the world alight. Its limited graphics and sound, simplified gameplay and the lack of special pipe pieces and obstacles made it a relatively simple version.



PSP

■ A remake of the game was developed by Razorworks and released for the PlayStation 2, Nintendo DS, Windows and PSP in 2008. It offered five modes, 70 levels and seven themes but with a steep learning curve, it could be as frustrating as it was addictive.

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY

IN THE KNOW

- **» DEVELOPER:** RARE
- **» COMPOSER:** DAVID WISE, EVELINE NOVAKOVIC AND ROBIN BEANLAND
- **» BEST TRACK:** AQUATIC AMBIANCE
- **» RELEASE:** 1994
- **» PLATFORM:** SNES
- **» GENRE:** PLATFORMER

RARE'S DONKEY KONG COUNTRY WAS A GROUND-BREAKING GAME IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE, WITH GAMERS GOING BANANAS OVER DAVID WISE'S STANDOUT SOUNDTRACK. INCORPORATING ENVIRONMENTAL SOUNDS AND MUSIC INSPIRED BY A BUNCH OF ICONIC ARTISTS, IT GOT THE MOST OUT OF THE SNES' IMPRESSIVE SPC700 SOUND CHIP

WORDS BY DAVID CROOKES

» [SNES] *DK Island Swing* is a homage to Forties jazz, in particular the Glenn Miller Orchestra.

» [SNES] David Wise was self-taught and he managed to get under the skin of the SNES, pushing it hard.

Rare's *Donkey Kong Country* was a smash-hit platformer that proved the SNES wasn't about to roll over and surrender to the flashy new 32-bit consoles. Aside from posing a satisfying challenge and boasting masterly crafted levels, the game was praised for its pre-rendered 3D visuals created on Silicon Graphics workstations. It was also notable for its superb soundtrack.

Composed by David Wise, Eveline Novakovic and Robin Beanland, it hit the spot immediately with *Theme*, a tune blessed with a pulsing bass line and ambient jungle noises. The soundtrack continued to please ears with the jaunty *Simian Segue*, the jungle beat of the *DK Island Swing* and the old-time rhythm of *Cranky's Theme*. The more gamers played, the more these undoubted classics would enthral. They just kept coming, elevating the game's overall experience.

Interestingly, David was influenced by artists from the Eighties. "I used to love all things Trevor Horn: Yes' studio album *90125*, Seal and Adamski," he says, referring to the English award-winning record producer and musician. "I also loved pioneering synth legends such as Vangelis, Jean-Michel Jarre and Gary Numan. I thought Phil Collins was very creative too, both as a song writer and with the technical side of things."

» [SNES] The soundtrack is very much inspired by each of the levels, with some having a jungle theme.

As such, David wanted *Donkey Kong Country*'s soundtrack to have a synth sound. "I was playing the Roland D50, Yamaha DX and Korg Wavestation synths and I wanted the SNES to sound like these," he says. "At first that was simply impossible but I love a challenge. I had to learn so much about sound design in the 'real' synths and then learn how to apply this to the SNES. I was ultimately inspired to create."

Fellow musician Robin Beanland introduced David to the Korg Wavestation. "It re-sequenced tiny fragments of audio data and made it sound wonderful," David explains. "I borrowed the idea and created something that vaguely resembled that on the SNES. It gave me a huge sound palette to work with and only used a small amount of data." He used 16-bit samples compressed down to 4-bit ADPCM along with 64K of sample data. "If I'd used the Nintendo music app, it would have used around half the available data," David explains. "I had to get creative."

To produce the individual tunes and ensure they fit well into the overall experience, David tapped into how *Donkey Kong Country*'s gameplay felt. "I usually start with the feel of a game," he says. "It dictates the tempo and the groove." For each tune, he composed the rhythm first. "I refined this throughout the process of developing the tune. I then had to

» [SNES] The music was composed by hand rather than within an app and this saved a lot of data.

David Wise composed music at Rare from 1985 to 2009 before setting up his own personal studio. He continues to work on game soundtracks, most recently on *Yooka-Replaylee*.

find a suitable chord sequence but I find the melodies almost compose themselves at this point. They're subconsciously formed because I've heard the track so often."

The music was created using an in-house assembler running on a very early PC. David also had a copy of Brief, a fast and powerful text editor aimed at programmers. "I also used Nintendo's compression tools for creating the compressed binary sample files. The rest was hard work, unstoppable determination and intense focus."

He employed some neat tricks. "I took a leaf from the Korg Wavestation which is a vector synthesis synthesiser and found that if I took a vocal or string sample and used single cycle waveforms, crossfading into each other, I could make very atmospheric moving textures," David says. "Music and synthesis is all about movement so I suddenly had a huge palette of sound to try. The result sounded quite impressive compared with traditional instruments. I also learned a lot about how the brain listens to music and the psychology involved. The intros would concentrate on one sound using eight channels. To add texture and FX, as soon as the second sound was introduced, I could reduce the complexity of the first sound. Listeners don't realise the first sound has been compromised; the assumption is that the sound hasn't changed."

David picks out *Life In The Mines* as an example of how he overcame technical challenges. "One of the keyboards I used at the time was an Ensoniq TS-12. It had some amazing patches on it," he says. "I emulated one of the patches from the TS-12 for *Life In The Mines* mainly just to see if it was possible. The opening sound has an underlying vocal sound that rises in pitch. There's also an accompanying metallic sound that also rises in pitch but flutters from loud to soft. On a synth, you'd use a square wave LFO for the volume changes and an envelope to scale and reduce the volume over time. You'd also have a pitch envelope to raise the pitch at the same time. The SNES had none of that by default so it all had to be recreated with the limited tools I had."

> "I USUALLY START WITH THE FEEL OF A GAME. IT DICTATES THE TEMPO AND THE GROOVE"
> DAVID WISE

Such struggles were worth it and David looks back at the soundtrack with great fondness. "Realising I could do everything differently to everyone else – to create a unique sonic soundscape – gave me a big boost at the time," he says. "I'm now very humbled and appreciative that people have enjoyed listening to the music, enjoying the art and having fun."

AN UNDERWATER HIT

Donkey Kong Country's standout song is a musical masterpiece

Aquatic Ambiance is arguably *Donkey Kong Country*'s standout track with its watery echoes, soft synth pads and reflective, meditative tone. Yet David wasn't sure it'd be well received. In fact, he felt the entire score was destined to be changed by Japanese composer Koji Kondo. "I was several months into development before I learned that Nintendo were happy with the music and both myself and Eveline were okay to carry on creating the soundtrack," he says.

The success of *Aquatic Ambiance*, therefore, surprised him. "It wasn't until I was midway through *Donkey Kong Country 2: Diddy's Kong Quest* that I read in a music magazine that Trent Reznor from Nine Inch Nails quite liked it," David says. "That was the first inkling that *Aquatic Ambiance* had legs. And it wasn't until I went to Magfest for the first time [Music And Games Festival in Maryland], listening to various bands play various covers of the music from the *Donkey Kong* series (all night until the early hours) that I understood."

» [SNES] *Aquatic Ambiance* was sampled by Childish Gambino and appears on his song *Eat Your Vegetables*.

ULTIMATE GUIDE

MEGA MAN X

MEGA MAN X LAUNCHED CAPCOM'S HERO INTO THE 16-BIT ERA WITH A BOLD REBOOT THAT PUT MOVEMENT, EXPLORATION, AND NON-LINEAR PROGRESSION FRONT AND CENTRE. MORE THAN 30 YEARS ON, ITS INSPIRED GAME MECHANICS AND VISIONARY DESIGN SENSIBILITIES STILL MAKE IT AN ESSENTIAL GAME IN THE SERIES

WORDS BY JAMES TOCCHIO

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM
- **DEVELOPER:** CAPCOM
- **PLATFORM:** SNES
- **RELEASED:** 1993
- **GENRE:** PLATFORMER

By 1990, *Mega Man* had sold over three million copies across three NES titles. But as 1991 approached, the Super Nintendo was the new toy, and games for the 8-bit NES began to be seen as second-rate. *Mega Man 4*, *5*, and *6*, released between 1990 and 1993, each received greater critical scorn than the one which came before it. For *Mega Man 5*, *GamePro* magazine quipped that, "Capcom must get [a] cash rebate for recycling videogames." *EGM* went harder on *Mega Man 6*, saying "*Mega Man* was fun [...] when the letters 'N E S' meant something. [...] But this series has to end soon."

Capcom's most recognizable character needed a 16-bit upgrade, a brand-new adventure to reinvent *Mega Man* for the modern console generation. The answer was *Mega Man X*.

"THREE YEARS INTO THE SNES' RUN, CAPCOM'S MOST RECOGNISABLE CHARACTER NEEDED A 16-BIT UPGRADE"

Mega Man X was developed by many of the same people who had made the previously excellent *Mega Man* games for the NES, and they were well positioned to know what worked and what needed to

» [SNES] Stage-select returns from previous *Mega Man* games, adding a tactical element.

» [SNES] Vile (known as VAVA in Japan) is the first miniboss encountered in *Mega Man X*.

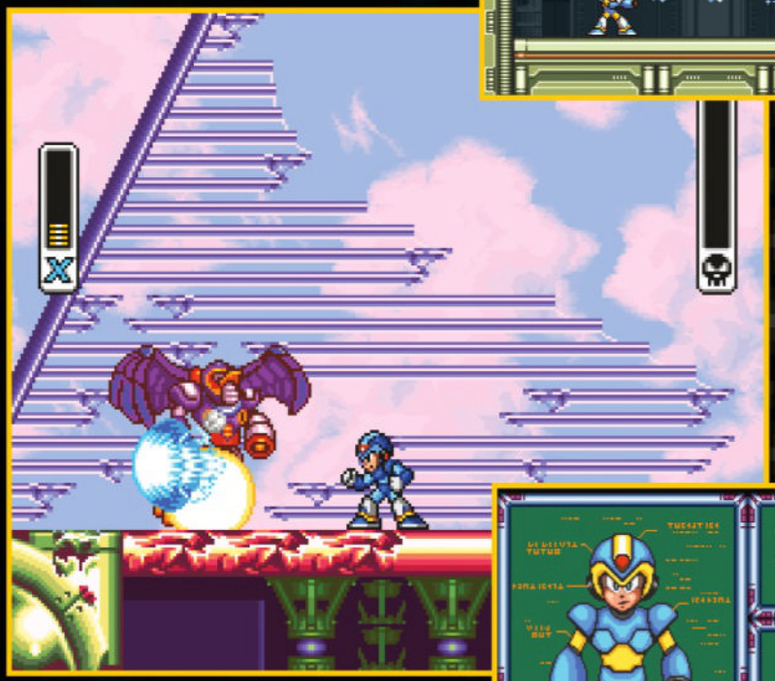
change. Keiji Inafune, longtime series artist and planner on *Mega Man X*, wanted "a totally different *Mega Man*". In many ways, that's what his team delivered.

The game takes place 100 years after the original NES *Mega Man* series, during a time when Reploid robots share a tense peace with humans. This peace is shattered when a Maverick Reploid known as Sigma leads an uprising against the humans. The player controls X, a Reploid Maverick Hunter who looks a lot like Mega Man and has a head full of existential questions. It's up to X and his ally Zero to hunt down and destroy the rogue Reploids to save humanity from the warring robots.

For a *Mega Man* game, this was a surprisingly mature plot. While no one would rightly describe the story of *Mega Man X* as Philip K Dick-ian, there are certainly elements of sophisticated sci-fi lightly sprinkled throughout. By the end, some or all of the game's main characters make the ultimate sacrifice, grapple with the morality of their actions, or question the very nature of life, death, war, and peace. That's a lot of drama for a 16-bit action platformer.

From a gameplay perspective, *X* retains many of the series' most familiar core elements of stage-select, weapon-stealing, and tight platforming. As in previous games, the player chooses a stage, navigates it while defeating enemies, and fights a big boss at the end. The bosses of *X* are now anthropomorphised robotic animals.

» [SNES] Certain bosses have major weaknesses against some weapons. Spark Mandrill is essentially allergic to ice.



» [SNES] Storm Eagle's attacks are aerial-based, swooping down and dropping bombs from above.

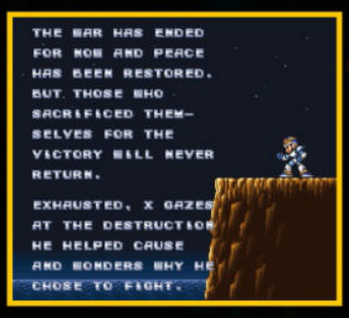
» [SNES] X assimilates the powerful weapons of defeated bosses (he gets a neat paint job, too).

THE X FACTOR

HOW THE MEGA MAN FORMULA WAS REINVENTED

UPGRADEABLE ARMOUR

Motivated by the popularity of 16-bit RPGs, *Mega Man X* devs sprinkled hidden capsules throughout Mega Man's first SNES adventure which allow X to upgrade his armour, Arm Cannon and leg boosters, essentially improving his mobility, defence and attack power.



A SOPHISTICATED STORY

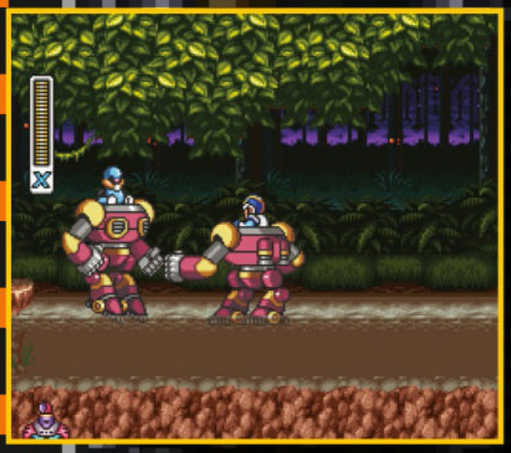
Longtime series artist and designer Keiji Inafune, said that a big part of reinventing *Mega Man* for the more advanced SNES involved creating a mature storyline. We see this notably in the ending, which leaves X pondering the very nature of existence.

A MODERN MOVESET

Mega Man X honours the core gameplay concepts of the NES *Mega Mans* but modernises player mobility in major ways. X can dash along the ground, scale walls, and slide down vertical surfaces, giving ample opportunity for tricky platforming and the discovery of hidden areas.

A ROBOTIC RYU

Playground lore said that *Mega Man X* contained a secret move: *Street Fighter*'s Hadouken. It's true! This hidden upgrade is hard-won but deals massive damage, finishing most bosses in a single shot. The original Mega Man would have loved it!



» [SNES] It's always a treat when we get to punch things using an armoured battle suit.

» [SNES] Fan favourite and series staple Zero plays a pivotal role in *Mega Man X*.

There's Launch Octopus, Storm Eagle, and Boomer Kuwanger (which is a Japanese word for stag beetle), and several more.

Each boss is a puzzle of a sort, with distinct personalities and movesets that must be analysed, memorised and exploited. Once a boss is defeated, the player adds their weapon to their arsenal. These new weapons are more (or less) effective against particular enemies, making weapon choice a tactical decision.

"KEIJI INAFUNE, LONGTIME SERIES ARTIST AND PLANNER ON MEGA MAN X, WANTED 'A TOTALLY DIFFERENT MEGA MAN'"

X also notably expands the *Mega Man* formula through addition of a full suite of movement upgrades which make X (both the character and the game itself) feel faster and more responsive than ever before. New to *X* is a dash ability, Wall Slide and Wall Jump. These new moves let players chain movement and combat together in a way that feels almost prototypical to what we now consider status quo. It's not hard to see traces of *Mega Man X*'s design language in recent 2D action/exploration games like *Hollow Knight* and *Ori*.

Incidentally, Inafune once joked that *Mega Man X*'s Wall Jump ability was inspired by the torturous development of *Mega Man X*. During a particularly nefarious drought of "good ideas", he kicked a wall out of frustration and decided to give his hero a similar ability.

Further enhancements to the gameplay involve, well, further enhancements! Another first for the series, hidden capsules can be found throughout the game which upgrade X's armour, weaponry and movement. More than just cosmetic upgrades, these changes fundamentally alter the way the game is played. Hidden and inaccessible areas in one stage might only be discovered after finding upgrades in another. For example, without the leg upgrade, it's impossible to dash to the helmet upgrade, and without the helmet upgrade, it's impossible to smash headfirst through the destructible blocks which bar you from reaching the X Buster upgrade.

And that X Buster upgrade is a big change, too. Once acquired, players can charge their stolen enemies' abilities (just like with the vanilla X Buster) and unleash a wide range of interesting special shots. There's one which makes a moving ice bridge, one which creates a bubble shield around X, and even one which makes X temporarily invincible. These special shots even combine with the game's new movement mechanics to facilitate exploration. Certain Heart Containers, for example, cannot be reached without using charged shot abilities and some combination of new movement methods.

Also new is the way that beating certain stages impacts subsequent stages in real-time. For example, if you beat Chill Penguin before you jump into Flame Mammoth's stage, the lava in the latter stage will be frozen (making the stage far easier).

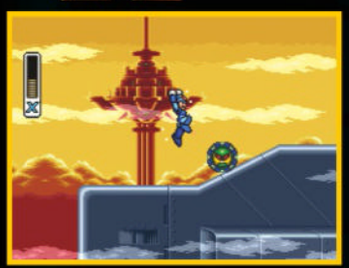
MEGA MAN XTRAS

EVERY MAINLINE GAME IN THE X SERIES

MEGA MAN X2

SNES • 1994

Capcom's sequel shares much of the first game's core elements but punches up the action and graphics with help from the SNES Cx4. It's an in-cartridge enhancement chip which allowed for 3D wireframe effects and transparencies. It's bigger, better *X*!



MEGA MAN X3

Various • 1995

This was the final *Mega Man X* game to release on the 16-bit SNES, and the first to debut on the 32-bit Sony PlayStation and Sega Saturn. It stuck to the tested *X* formula but introduced Zero as a (limited) playable character.

MEGA MAN X4

Various • 1997

Mega Man X4 was the first game in the series to be developed exclusively for the 32-bit systems, and it was easily the most ambitious *X* series game at that point. Zero became fully playable, with a unique melee-based moveset.

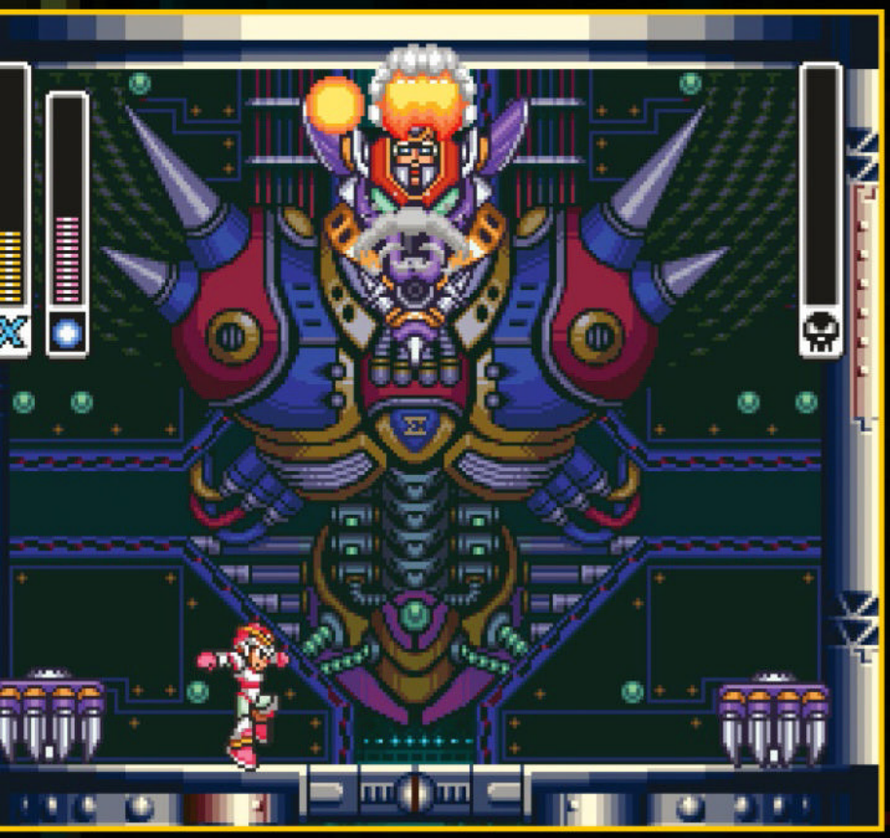
MEGA MAN X5

Various • 2000

It was originally intended that *X5* would be the final game in the series so Capcom went all out. *X5* features branching pathways, new movement styles, upgradable characters, strategy mechanics, and a plot that sets up multiple climactic endings.

» [SNES] The first level sets the scene nicely, with crumbling platforms and dangerous enemies to defeat.

» [SNES] Doctor Thomas Light remains an important figure in the *Mega Man X* series and a useful ally to X.



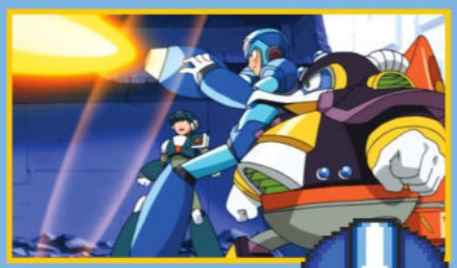
» [SNES] The final multi-phase battle with Sigma is one of the most challenging of its era.

MEGA MAN XPANDS

MANGA, ANIME AND UNLOCKABLE ANIMATIONS ADD TO THE SERIES' LORE

The success of *Mega Man X* and its sequels birthed a multimedia franchise. A manga adaptation of the first four games in the *X* series by Yoshihiro Iwamoto ran from 1994 to 1998, while an original story by Shigeto Ikehara based around the events of *Mega Man X*, called *Irregular Hunter Rockman X*, ran from 1994 to 1995. Manga from Hitoshi Ariga and Daisuke Inoue has also been published by Comic BomBom, and characters and events from the *X* series have appeared in Archie Comics' *Mega Man* and *Sonic The Hedgehog* runs.

Completing a playthrough of *Maverick Hunter X*, the 2005 PSP remake of *Mega Man X*, unlocks a 25-minute anime called *The Day Of Sigma*, which details Sigma's path to becoming a Maverick leader, and brings you right up to the opening of the first level of the game. This animation is also included in the two-part *Mega Man X Legacy Collection*, released for the Switch, PlayStation, Windows and Xbox in 2017 and 2018.



MEGA MAN X6

PlayStation • 2001

Keiji Inafune, instrumental in the creation of previous *Mega Man* games, was not involved in *X6*'s production, and the game was regarded by many fans and critics as the beginning of a downturn. At least Mega Man has a sword now…

MEGA MAN X7

PlayStation 2 • 2003

After the acknowledged disappointment of *X6*, Capcom regrouped and released *X7* on the PlayStation 2. It tried to offer new (annoying) characters and new gameplay through a divisive reliance on full 3D gameplay. It didn't work.

MEGA MAN X8

Various • 2004

The final game in the *Mega Man X* series, *X8* sought to undo the failings of *X6* and *X7*. It was a 2.5D side-scroller with limited 3D gameplay. While *X8* certainly looked nice, it failed to add anything truly extraordinary to the series.

» [SNES] You'll find yourself underwater while exploring the lair of Surge Octopus. Better bring flippers!

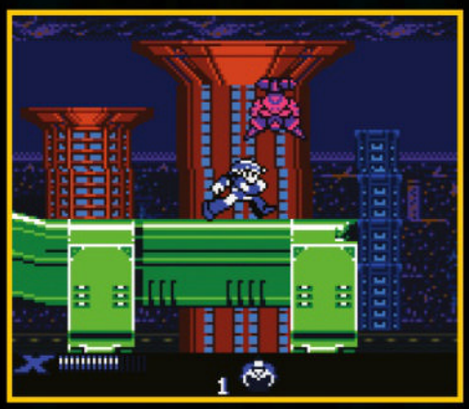
» [SNES] The X Buster upgrade lets you charge and fire your boss weapons, and each has a unique effect.

» [SNES] X faces off against another mid-level boss. Fortunately, he's got a decent amount of health left, so we fancy our chances.

» [SNES] It certainly takes a lot of effort, but a fully kitted X has every boss weapon, four energy tanks and a large life bar.

MINI ADVENTURES

MEGA MAN GOES PORTABLE



MEGA MAN XTREME

Game Boy Color • 2000

The first game in the *Mega Man X* Game Boy Color series blends a new story with stages, enemies, and bosses from the SNES versions of *Mega Man X* and *Mega Man X2*. It is smaller in scale compared to the SNES originals, and the graphical cutbacks hurt, but it's a decent portable Xperience (sorry).

MEGA MAN XTREME 2

Game Boy Color • 2001

The second Game Boy Color *MMX* game features the ability to switch between X and Zero and adds the DNA Soul System for upgrading your chosen character. Like its predecessor, *Xtreme 2* was decent in its own time, but was quickly eclipsed by the Game Boy Advance *Mega Man*s.

» [SNES] Sigma adds dogfighting to his long list of egregious crimes.

▶ Changes also occur if you beat Storm Eagle before fighting Spark Mandrill, and if you beat Launch Octopus before fighting Sting Chameleon.

The kinetic energy of *X*'s gameplay is matched perfectly to a suite of hard-charging tunes by Capcom's in-house band, Alph Lyla. The soundtrack was mostly composed by Setsuo Yamamoto, with contributions from Yuki Iwai, Toshihiko Horiyama, Yuko Takehara and Makoto Tomozawa. The screaming electric synth guitars are punctuated with intense drum and bass backing. These songs act as a sort of propeller, shoving the player forward through every stage. Even the password screen's music is a delight.

Mega Man X's blend of tried-and-true gameplay and innovative retooling resonated with players and critics alike. Mechanical clarity came from tight platforming, reliable collision and logical boss battles. Pumped-up spectacle came from the graphical jump to a 16-bit system. Atmospheric impact came from a more sophisticated story. It all combined into something very special. At launch, *Mega Man X* was widely praised as a successful reinvention of the series. In *EGM*, the game earned 9/10, while *Game Players* magazine summarised it as, "A near-perfect cart."

"AT LAUNCH, MEGA MAN X WAS WIDELY PRAISED AS A SUCCESSFUL REINVENTION OF THE SERIES"

Mega Man X went on to sell more than 1.1 million copies and spawned eight mainline sequels and several spin-offs over the next 13 years. And while it's easy to say that this success was inevitable, that the NES *Mega Man* games simply laid the groundwork, and that the 16-bit game was destined to succeed, that narrative flattens the truth. The team at Capcom who created *Mega Man X* took major risks. They fought technical hurdles to reframe a beloved hero who many claimed was past his prime and introduced elements of narrative darkness and gameplay mechanics that could have easily alienated stubborn fans. In the end, *Mega Man X*'s legendary status was earned through tough choices and careful attention.

While the *X* series followed a similar parabola to the *Mega Man* series that came before it, one in which the immediate sequels were thrilling improvements followed by an eventual and drastic decline by the sixth, seventh, and eighth iterations, the original *Mega Man X* was and remains a legitimate masterpiece. More than thirty years later, it's a high-priced favourite among collectors, and one of Capcom's best games of the 16-bit era. ★

PLAY TODAY

ENJOYING MEGA MAN X ON (SOMEWHAT) MODERN SYSTEMS

There are plenty of ways to play *Mega Man X* today. Hardware purists can simply fire up the old CRT, click the cartridge into their SNES, and hit the power switch. Unlike many old SNES carts, which use a battery for their save game feature, *Mega Man X* uses passwords. No battery (or soldering) required!

Mega Man X was remade for the Sony PSP in 2005. This updated version eschewed the original's sprites for a 2.5D presentation that's charming in its own way. And then there's the convenience of *Mega Man X Legacy Collection*, a two-part compilation which packs all eight main *Mega Man X* games into two releases. Available for the Switch, PlayStation, Windows (Steam) and Xbox, *Legacy Collection* features several screen size and filtering options, save features not found in the originals, an easier selectable Rookie difficulty level, art galleries, extra modes, and several other quality-of-life improvements.

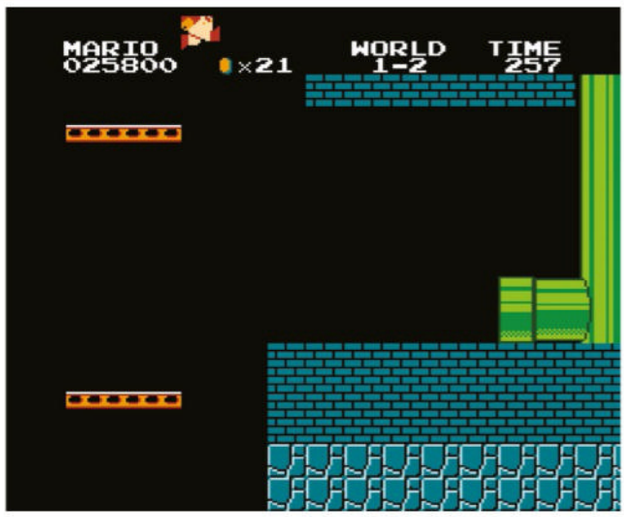
» [PC] The *Legacy Collection*'s X Challenge Mode pits you against two bosses at once!"

SUPER MARIO BROS

» **PLATFORM:** NES » **RELEASED:** 1985 » **CHEAT TYPE:** LEVEL SKIP » **CHEAT COMPLEXITY:** LOW

It may not be the oldest trick in the book, strictly speaking, but learning how to access the Warp Zones in *Super Mario Bros* was a formative experience for many of us. The first one in the game can be found in World 1-2, and it's very simple to access. When you find a set of ascending platforms that act like an elevator, ride them to the top of the screen and jump into the HUD area of the screen, then run to the right until you find the three pipes that will take you to World 2-1, 3-1 or 4-1.

While it's a simple secret, it's one of the very best in the way that it works with our expectations of the game screen. The level is constructed so that it appears as if there's a distinct status bar, so you don't initially think to enter that area. Once you discover that you can, you feel very clever for breaking through a perceived boundary, even though it's something the development team clearly put there intentionally.



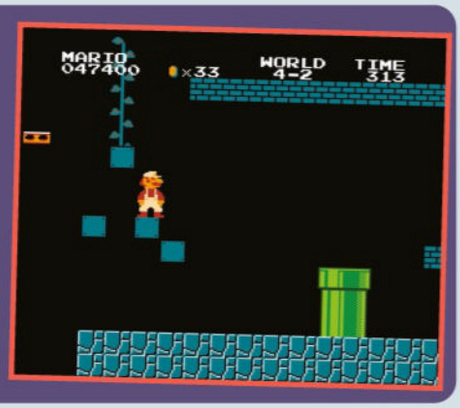
MORE CHEATS TO TRY OUT

WORST WARP

If you use the top of the screen to bypass the exit pipe in World 4-2 in the same way as in 1-2, you can find a further Warp Zone that will take you to World 5-1. If you're looking to cut your completion time, it's best avoided as there's a better option.

TRICKY WARP

In World 4-2, just after the first downward elevator platform, Mario can reveal hidden blocks and a vine as shown, leading up to a hidden area. This secret space contains no enemies, a whole bunch of coins and a Warp Zone that can take you to World 6-1, 7-1 or 8-1.



EXTENDED ADVENTURE

Lost all your lives? There's a secret continue feature, and it's maddeningly easy to access. Once you've returned to the title screen after getting the dreaded Game Over, simply hold **A** before pressing **Start** and you'll return to the first stage of the last World you were on.

LIGHT IT UP

Did you ever wonder what triggers the fireworks at the end of a stage? It's all to do with the timer – if the last digit is 1, 3 or 6 when you grab the flagpole, you'll get the same number of fireworks. You'll also earn 500 points for each, which is a nice little bonus.

WORLD WANDERER

After completing the game, your next play session will be tougher, with different enemies. You can also select the starting stage by pressing **B** at the title screen. As the NES cartridge doesn't possess any save features, these benefits only last until the console is switched off.

GAIN LOADS OF LIVES

This one's more of an exploit than an intentional secret. Defeating eight or more enemies in a row will earn you extra lives – but if you can repeatedly bounce a Koopa off a nearby block, it'll have the same effect. The end of World 3-1 is a good place to try this.

MAGAZINE CRAFT

BRIAN SHEA

A big baseball fan, Brian Shea's rise to the major leagues of game journalism saw him freelance for various gaming outlets before getting signed to play (and write) for Game Informer. We chat to him about his career, love of all things Nintendo, and what the future holds for the iconic and enduring US videogame magazine following its triumphant return earlier this year

Words by Stuart Hunt

THEN

Brian started out as an independent music journalist before retuning his keyboard to write about videogames thanks to the popularity of *Guitar Hero* and *Fallout 3*. He then freelanced for *Official Xbox Magazine* (US), IGN and Kotaku, prior to landing a full-time writing gig at *Game Informer*.

NOW

Brian is now the executive editor of *Game Informer*, which is now owned by the game studio Gunzilla Games following the magazine's closure last year by GameStop. In his spare time, he also runs and hosts the popular gaming podcast, All Things Nintendo.

» [Xbox 360] Brian is a big sports, music and videogame fan. It should come as no surprise then that he loves *Guitar Hero*. He even played it competitively at one point.

What are some of the first videogames you remember playing, Brian?
I remember visiting my cousins' house for a holiday, or family gathering, and they had a NES with *Tetris* and the *Super Mario Bros/Duck Hunt* double cartridge. On my dad's side of the family, they had *The Legend Of Zelda*, *Bubble Bobble* and *GOAL! Two*. Whenever I visited, I would just immediately disappear to play Nintendo. They always joked they never saw me. I was instantly hooked because I didn't have a videogame console at the time; my parents had an old Apple computer.

When did you finally get your first videogame console?
It was Christmas '92 and I remember begging my parents for a games console. I had opened all my presents and there was no Nintendo under the tree. But then I spotted this gift sticking out from behind the couch. If you've ever seen *A Christmas Story*, where the kid wants the Red Ryder BB Gun, that's exactly what happened. I unwrapped it and it was the Super Nintendo *Super Mario World* pack. That game quickly became an obsession. I must have beaten it over a thousand times as a kid. The SNES remains a special console for me as it helped me bond with my dad. He worked as a computer consultant and travelled a lot. I have fond memories of us playing *Super Mario Kart* and *Donkey Kong Country* together.

Was writing something you enjoyed at school?
Growing up, I didn't like writing all that much. I hated writing essays, and the first hint I got that I could enjoy writing was when I got to write about a topic I was interested in. I got into team sports and started writing for the school newspaper. Also, around this time, I had a Sega Genesis and was really into the baseball game *Triple Play Gold Edition*. That game kind of sparked my love of baseball and a desire to write for the sports section of the paper. I then got the opportunity to write biographies on two very special people to me: my favourite athlete of all time, the baseballer Cal Ripken Jr, and my grandfather. That was the moment I realised I really loved writing when it was on a topic I truly cared about.

What set you on the path to writing as a career?
At college I was a resident assistant, so was kind of in charge of overseeing the dorms. Part of that responsibility meant I had to be in an office multiple times a week, for several hours on end. I'd have all my work done and needed to fill the time with something else to do. So, I teamed up with a friend in 2007 to launch a music website that unfortunately no longer exists. It started off as a kind of message board where people gathered to talk about music. That evolved with me writing album reviews, reaching out to bands via Myspace and getting some well-known artists to agree to interviews.

How did the music thing evolve into writing about videogames?
It was all down to *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*. These games became popular, so I started writing about videogames too. My actual first ever videogame review was for *Fallout 3*. I had heard the game was getting all these positive reviews from all the magazines. I tried it out and I'm like, "This is incredible." I played it all the way to the end. That experience inspired me to try writing a game review and, ultimately, I realised that I loved that even more than album reviews. I was also playing *Guitar Hero* competitively. At

» Brian meeting Shigeru Miyamoto and Koji Kondo at the premier of *The Super Mario Bros Movie*. As a lifelong Nintendo fan, it was a special moment for him.

the time I was like, I'm a perfect fit, so I pitched myself to content farms – these hubs for freelance websites that paid per click and all that nonsense. It was a way to get my foot in the door.

Tell us about the next website you founded, which did have a videogame focus.
In 2010, I cofounded the website, VGW [Video Game Writers]. My friend Jason and I ran it on the side of our day jobs. Despite that, we were determined to run it professionally and the way we would want to see the industry covered, and I think that shines through in a lot of our coverage. There were growing pains and missteps, but ultimately, I think we accomplished that task. We had a wide range of contributors and some of them have gone on to be big names in the industry. One of them is now a massive YouTuber, another is the lead developer behind a beloved Indie title from several years ago.

> "The SNES remains a special console for me as it helped me bond with my dad. I have fond memories of us playing Super Mario Kart and Donkey Kong Country together"
> BRIAN SHEA

What made you realise that writing about videogames was your true calling?
PAX East 2011 was the first major event I attended and that experience really cemented my love for writing about videogames. I remember I would always come back with a kind of post-event hangover from these events – not in the alcohol sense, but in the feeling that I went there cosplaying as a game journalist. Coming back to the real world, to a day job I didn't really care for, was always tough. That first PAX I met people I really cared about: Suda51, Felicia Day, Adam Sessler. I had met all these people that I had either seen on TV or played their games. It's funny, because I didn't know who he was at the time, but I think James Gunn was at that PAX East for *Lollipop Chainsaw*. I walked right past him and now he's running DC's movie division.

So how did you set about taking the next step?
Around 2009, I was living in Pittsburgh and looking at ways to truly break into the industry. I started taking classes at a local community college about writing for print media. I was interviewing for positions and got turned down by every publication imaginable. I had one of my worst interviews of all time with IGN the day after coming back from PAX East. I got cold-called by their editor-in-chief while I was taking a nap. As you would imagine, being half awake and being called by the editor-in-chief of one of the biggest gaming publications at the time, it's ▶

My FAVOURITE GAMING MAG

GAMEPRO

"I thoroughly enjoyed *GamePro's* coverage growing up and it was the magazine I could most reliably find at my local supermarket. At PAX East 2011, there was a talk on games journalism, and I remember one of the panellists was an editor at *GamePro*. I went up to her and asked her a few questions. I was quite starstruck and remember thinking it was the coolest thing ever, as I had grown up reading this magazine."

I REMEMBER WHEN

NINTEND-ADDICT!
"I remember spending a weekend with my aunt and uncle and being so excited that I could play their NES the entire time. When I arrived though, they told me they'd sold it. I was devastated. Years later, they admitted they didn't sell it; they just hid it whenever I came over so they could see me!"

» [Xbox 360] *Fallout 3* was a big deal when it launched and got rave reviews. It was also the game that inspired Brian to write his very first videogame review.

I REMEMBER WHEN

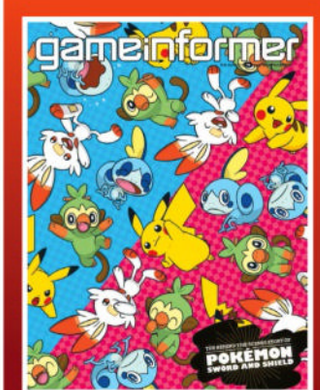
FINAL BOSSES

"I'm a big *Street Fighter* fan and for *Game Informer*'s *Street Fighter 6* cover story I got to visit Capcom's HQ in Osaka. I spent two full days there and even got to spend an evening playing *Street Fighter* in a local arcade with the director and producer."

My PROUDEST MOMENT

WORKING ON GAME INFORMER

"Being part of this magazine that I love so much. Playing a small role in *Game Informer*'s history and trajectory means a lot to me. That I get to write cover stories is incredible as well. I just wrote my 13th, and I have all of them framed on the walls in my home. The fact that I was begging to write a cover story for so many years, and now I get to write multiple ones a year is incredible; and many of them are for new games from some of my favourite franchises. I have two *Sonic* covers, a *Mario* cover, a *Street Fighter* and *Final Fantasy* cover, and a *Pokémon* cover – the franchise that got me into turn-based RPGs. It's great to be a part of telling those stories."



a little intimidating and my sentences seemed to trail off a lot because of my nerves. So yeah, that wasn't my finest hour. I was also turned down from *Game Informer* three times.

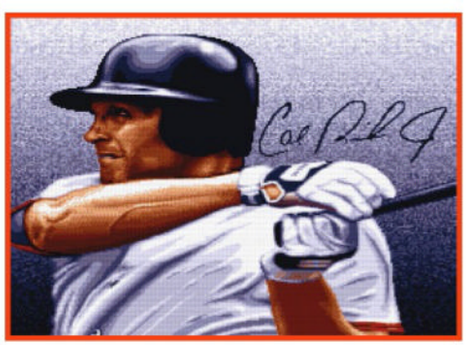
> "The Game Informer vault was legendary. It contained all the games and gaming memorabilia from when Game Informer was founded in 1991"
> BRIAN SHEA

So, what happened, We're guessing your luck changed?

I started freelancing to try to get my byline more established. Fran Reyes, who was the editor-in-chief of *Official Xbox Magazine* in the US, had followed me on Twitter so I messaged her asking if she was looking for freelance contributors. Fran was just the most gracious and attentive editor. She was like, "Yeah, send some pitches to me." So, I did and there was one they wanted to move forward with – a piece about independent retro game shops and how they were staying open in the then current market. These days retro gaming is massive, but this was before it became so big.

Do you remember the first time seeing your work in print?

I remember it vividly. Every time I saw a copy of *OXM* I would flick through it to see if my article was inside. One day, I was in Dallas Fort Worth Airport and saw there was a new issue with *Grand Theft Auto V* on the cover. I opened the magazine and there it was at the very back. It was just one page, but it was the coolest thing. From there, I started to get bigger assignments for *OXM*. One of the biggest was to write the Xbox One launch guide – for the official Xbox magazine! I didn't take that responsibility lightly, and that was the confidence boost I needed to start pitching to other outlets. I got work published on IGN, Kotaku and Joystiq. I then went to my first E3 in 2014 and that led to me joining *Game Informer*.



» [SNES] Writing about his sporting hero, Cal Ripken Jr, helped Brian realise his love of writing. Ironically, the baseball legend has his own licensed 16-bit videogame.

Interesting, tell us more.

So, I go to E3. I paid my own way and basically just forced my way into as much as I could. Somehow, I got an invite to the EA press conference, and the *Game Informer* guys were sitting behind me. I had just had an article published on Kotaku thanks to the incredible Tina Amini, who was the deputy editor at the time. She was great at making me not feel like garbage when I didn't do something the right way. She brought out the best in my writing. Anyway, we were sat together at this conference and at the end she introduced me to Andy McNamara, the editor-in-chief and cofounder of *Game Informer*. As fate would have it, he had read my Kotaku article and really liked it. Fast forward a few months and Dan Ryckert, the head of Giant Bomb, left *Game Informer* which left an opening. I applied for a fourth time and finally got an interview. Then I got a second interview with Andy and other members of the leadership team. I later received a nice letter from Andy thanking me for the conversation and saying he's a fan of my work. I'm thinking, that's got to be a good sign. But then I didn't hear anything back for months.

You must have feared the worst.

I'm working a soul-sucking job that I cannot wait to get out of. I'm like, "If this doesn't happen, I'm just going to find another way out." I'd

even registered a new domain in anticipation of being rejected so that I could write about music again. Thankfully, that didn't happen because I got the job. I relocated from Austin, Texas to Minneapolis and joined *Game Informer* as an associate editor. It was a dream come true but also really intimidating, because *Game Informer* had people who were there for many years and were like the pros of the pros.

> "I had one of my worst interviews of all time with IGN the day after coming back from PAX East. I got cold-called by their editor-in-chief while I was taking a nap"
> BRIAN SHEA

How did it compare to your expectations?
I remember my first impression was like, whoa, this is a cool office because they had all these incredible gaming artefacts. And, of course, the *Game Informer* vault was legendary. It contained all the games and gaming memorabilia from when *Game Informer* was founded in 1991. Inside were VHS tapes with early game trailers, process development builds, discs of early screenshots and game renders, even early merchandise for games like *Pokémon*. Did you know the original tagline was "Catch 'em if you can!"? Fortunately, before we were closed in August 2024, The Video Game History Foundation was embedded in our office for a few weeks to chronicle all the stuff inside. So, it's not lost completely to time thanks to the foundation's director, Frank Cifaldi, and his team.

Coming from a web background, did you have ideas for the digital side of *Game Informer*?
The thing that was underwhelming to me was the website. It was a bit of a mess and hard to work with. You had to go to an external server to upload images and then copy the URLs and paste them in these different fields. Thankfully, in 2017 our internal team rebuilt it from the ground up, so I only had to deal with that janky old website for about two years. Anyway, leadership were looking for someone to take over the digital magazine. I don't know what drove me to do this, but I walked into Andy's office and was like, "I know I'm still the new guy here, but I'd be willing to take on the responsibility." So, I did that for about a year and got promoted to digital editor. The great thing about that role was that it got me a seat at the leadership table. It was surreal to be the new guy sitting in on these meetings every morning to discuss coverage opportunities, trips, features and covers, but eventually it led to things like me revamping our social media strategy, which was something I kind of spearheaded.

Tell us about some of the regular features, like the Game Of The Year articles.
They were always a bit of a bloodbath. I think 2014 was a particularly rough year. I think it was between *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Shadow Of Mordor*. From what I understand, that was a particularly contentious conversation. Thankfully, that was two months before I joined. But 2017 was also a particularly bloody conversation, with the likes of *Breath Of The Wild*, *Horizon Zero Dawn*

My BEST PRESS TRIP

METAPHOR: REFANTAZIO

Writing many cover stories for *Game Informer* has given Brian the opportunity to fly all over the world and chat to development teams behind some of the biggest gaming franchises. Naturally, visiting the studios of the games most dear to him are always the most memorable. "My favourite stuff is always when we have a chance to go out to the studios," says Brian. "I think my favourite of those was the Tokyo trip I did for the *Metaphor: ReFantazio* cover story that never was because of *Game Informer*'s closure. I'm a big, big fan of *Persona*, which they also made. I love *3*, *4* and *5* a lot. Number *5* is one of my favourite RPGs of all time. So, to sit down with the director and the character artist of that series was fantastic. Getting a tour of the areas that inspired *Persona 5* by Katsura Hashino – including the exterior for Café Leblanc – was an amazing experience. I have a video of that and ended up publishing it on my personal YouTube channel. Opportunities like that will stick with me for the rest of my life."

I REMEMBER WHEN

GOTTA TRY 'EM ALL!
"For the *Pokémon Sword And Shield* cover story I got to visit a Japanese steakhouse with Junichi Masuda and Shigeru Ohmori. I remember Masuda recommending which Japanese whiskeys I should try. That was a cool highlight."

My BEST INTERVIEW

FINAL FANTASY XII REBIRTH TEAM

Brian admits there have been many memorable interviews throughout his career – so many that picking just one was a real struggle. Meeting Shigeru Miyamoto is something he will never forget, but the one interview that has stuck with him was when he got to spend a couple of hours in the company of three RPG legends. "I got to sit down for two hours straight with Naoki Hamaguchi, Yoshinori Kitase and Tetsuya Nomura – so the creator of *Kingdom Hearts*, the longtime producer since the earliest days in Kitase, and the director of the remake trilogy in Hamaguchi," says Brian. "I asked them every question imaginable about *FFVII* Rebirth and remember thinking we're at the two-hour mark, they're not going to want to keep going. I ask my final question and Kitase gives his answer, Hamaguchi says his and then there's a break and we just assume that Nomura doesn't want to answer the question as he's probably tired. The translator goes to wrap up the interview and Nomura politely interrupts asking, 'Do I get to answer?' I was thinking, "Yes, he enjoyed the interview.'"

I REMEMBER WHEN

FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVES

"Working for *Game Informer* has gotten me first in line to play a couple of big games, and hopefully many more to come. I was the first person outside of Nintendo to play *Super Mario Odyssey*, and the first person outside of Sega to play *Sonic Frontiers*."

GAME INFORMER™
Magazine
For Video Game Enthusiasts!
Fall Issue 1991
Sizzling Hot Pre-Release Reviews Inside!
• De-Cap-Attack
• Micro Machines
• NHL Hockey
Game Genie Controversy
Best Bets To Keeping Equipment Clean
Super Sonic Tips – Throughout This Issue
Ghoulish Scenes from De-Cap-Attack and Body-Slamming Action of NHL Hockey
What's New For Fall? Screen Previews Inside
FUNCO: The Best Way to Increase Your Video Game Library!

» The first issue of *Game Informer*, released in 1991. The magazine has been running for an incredible 35 years.

» The relaunch issue of *Game Informer* led with a *Borderlands 4* cover story written by Brian. The cover is framed on his office wall.

▶ and *Super Mario Odyssey*. It's funny because we were coming off 2016, which was the easiest Game Of The Year conversation I think we've ever had in the early years of my time at *Game Informer*. We were all just like, oh yeah, *Overwatch* – that's it!

> "It was a dream come true but also really intimidating, because Game Informer had people who were there for many years and were like the pros of the pros"
> BRIAN SHEA

And the popular Game Infarcer articles, what can you share about those?

Game Infarcer was almost like a precursor to the website Hard Drive, with its parody articles. A few people on staff were friends with a comic artist, and we would commission him to come in and create a fake cover that was pertinent to one of the articles we were doing at the time. We had a fictitious editor, and would all write parody articles. I think one was like: *Mighty Number 9* announces a game from the year edition that comes with a special steelbook shaped like a trash can. Stuff like that. We haven't done it for a few years now, because our staff was so impacted by layoffs. We just didn't have the time to do it in print, but we've continued doing it to an extent on the web.

Speaking about the closure of *Game Informer*, what was that period like?

I've said this on multiple occasions – it was almost like three prongs of sadness, because I had lost my job in an industry I had worked so hard to get into. That meant I wouldn't get to work with all these people I love anymore. Also, my favourite magazine in the world no longer existed. I had good days and bad days afterwards. Some days I was really motivated to get my podcast more of a following. Other days I just didn't want to do anything – not even play videogames because it was too painful a reminder. It helped having everybody together. Even when the first layoffs hit in 2019, where *Game Informer* lost 40% of its staff, we started an alumni Slack channel where everybody could stay in touch, support each other and share job listings. We also stayed in touch through other means. I had a lot of them on my podcast and played games with some of them.

Tell us a bit about your podcast, All Things Nintendo. How did that come about?

I launched that in October of 2021 under the *Game Informer* umbrella. It was when we were trying to build out a podcast network. Our former editor-in-chief, Andrew Reiner, had a comics-focussed podcast, and former senior editor, Ben Reeves had a podcast called Video Gameography that looked at every game in a franchise or by a developer. The Game Informer Show was our flagship show, and All Things Nintendo was the fourth in that network. Andrew left the company, he's now at Gearbox, and Ben also left to join Firaxis Games. Marcus Stewart picked up Video Gameography, but he just didn't have the time to carry it beyond another season, leaving just All Things Nintendo and The Game Informer Show. In February of 2024, we got hit with another round of layoffs and I was like, "Look, I'm picking up too many

» More recent *Game Informer* covers have tended to let the art do all the talking.

» Before becoming an executive editor at *Game Informer*, Brian was the digital editor and produced both video and written content.

responsibilities now. It's either I stop doing the podcast or I take it independent." Thankfully, I was able to take it independent, and it's been with me for about a year and a half now.

OK, so this story does have a happy ending. How did *Game Informer* make its comeback?

By the time *Game Informer* was closed I was the online content director. I was overseeing the website and had director in my title. So, when I shared on LinkedIn that *Game Informer* was closing, people started reaching out to me about buying the brand. So, one by one, I connected them with our editor-in-chief, Matt Miller. He would have the conversation with them and from what I understand, none of those really went anywhere. We were closed in August and in early September something happened. Matt barely ever posts on social media, but he had posted a sort of final letter from the editor, thanking people for their support over the years. And it's funny because if you look there's someone who responds to this letter. It says please check your email, or something like that. I guess they had emailed Matt about trying to get connected to somebody to acquire the *Game Informer* brand and it had gone to his junk mail.

So what happened next?

He found it and connected them with our previous parent company. And it was kind of like, OK, well, just like every other person who has reached out, this is probably going to go nowhere. Like this is the longest of long shots, but the conversation kept getting more serious. And sure enough, in late-January, it happened. We had job offers in mid-February and started work late-February on the first relaunch issue. It felt fantastic being back. It's great to have our parent company, Gunzilla Games, believing in us and investing in the magazine.

What can readers, old and new, expect from *Game Informer* 2.0?

We're continuing to uphold the quality of content that people have come to expect from us over the years, but at the same time, we want to do things bigger and better. We want to try new things, figure out where there are gaps in our coverage and find new directions to take our content. We've experimented a little bit with the magazine already, doing more personal stories and keeping that sense of humour. It's funny, I recently reviewed *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance* and talked about the kind of tightrope that game must walk – it must feel like a *Shinobi* game while also appealing to modern game design conventions. I kind of feel that's what we're having to do as well.

» Brian's latest cover story for *Game Informer* (at the time of writing) is about the long overdue return of *Ninja Gaiden* by two of gaming's biggest action stars: PlatinumGames and Team Ninja.

My FUTURE CLASSIC

ASTRO BOT

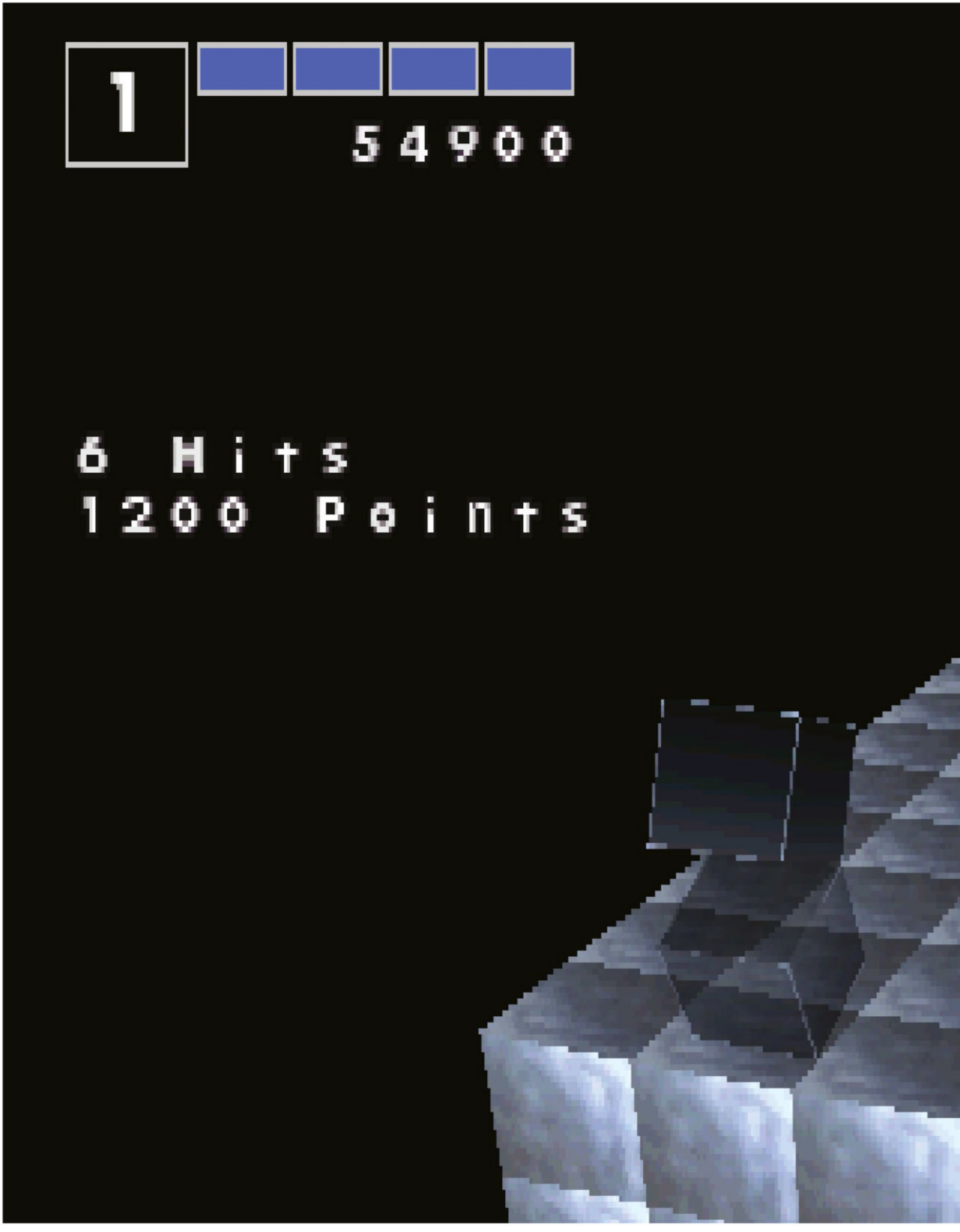
"I think *Balatro* and *Vampire Survivors* are classics in the sense of games that will inspire a lot going forward. If we're just talking about incredible games, I'm going for *Astro Bot*, which was our 2024 Game Of The Year. It has the most perfect 3D platforming level design you will ever see – it's right up there with Nintendo's 3D *Mario* games."

I REMEMBER WHEN

AND TO CAP IT ALL OFF!

"I flew out to Finland to visit Remedy and got to do some motion capture for *Control* with my former colleague, Elise Favis. We got suited up for some enemy animations and recorded something for the opening cutscene. I don't think any of it got used though."

» Brian rubbing shoulders with Nintendo Of America president and CEO Reggie Fils-Aimé at a Wii U event in 2012. Ten years later, Fils-Aimé would go on to guest on Brian's All Things Nintendo podcast.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6 Hits
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Kurushi

L'APPEL DU VIDE

» PLAYSTATION » 1997 » G-ARTISTS

Shortly before I started on Retro Gamer, I had a housemate whose boyfriend would always turn off the music in videogames if given the option. I was baffled by that choice, as music is often crucial to creating the mood the developers intended, so I always leave it on. There's only a single game that I'd follow his lead on, and of course it's one that doesn't give you an option to disable the music.

Kurushi is a puzzle game in which you've got to clear blocks as they advance along a platform, without getting crushed or eliminating forbidden blocks. I first encountered it on a demo disc, and it made a massive impression with its austere presentation. You're just some guy, stuck on a floating platform of giant blocks in the middle of a black void. There's no music, just the noises of the man running around and removing blocks. If you get things right, you'll get a little more room to move and a voice will announce "Perfect!". Get it wrong and blocks begin to fall away from your platform, accompanied by a hideous crashing sound and that same voice bellowing "Again!". You can be knocked down by rising blocks or crushed by rolling blocks, but you'll keep going until you either experience the brief reprieve of success, or else fall off the platform and into the endless darkness.

It's a fun game hiding behind some very basic visuals, but whenever I play the full game, I find myself slightly disappointed. You see, it features a dramatic orchestral soundtrack that the developers clearly wanted you to hear, since there's no option to turn it off. That makes it obvious that the demo's eerie lack of background music wasn't part of the plan, and what's there isn't bad at all – quite the opposite, really. There's just something about playing it without music that I find to be deliciously nightmarish.

THE MAKING OF

RB2 THE NEWCOMERS™

REAL BOUT FATAL FURY 2

FAST, BEAUTIFUL, AND CHARISMATIC, FATAL FURY REAL BOUT 2: THE NEWCOMERS REMAINS AN ICON OF THE FIGHTING GAME GENRE. WITH AN UPDATED VERSION RECENTLY LANDING ON STEAM, IT'S TIME TO RETURN TO ITS CREATION – AND SPEAK TO THOSE INVOLVED IN THE ORIGINAL AND THE NEW PORT

WORDS BY WILL FREEMAN

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** SNK
- **DEVELOPER:** SNK
- **PLATFORM:** ARCADE, VARIOUS
- **RELEASED:** 1998
- **GENRE:** FIGHTING GAME

When the first *Fatal Fury* game made it to arcade machines in 1991, it marked a significant moment in the history of the iconic outfit SNK. In time, the Japanese firm would go on to stand as one of the most important developers and publishers of fighting games globally. And it unquestionably owes much of that success to the birth and evolution of *Fatal Fury*.

Adopting the conventional template for head-to-head fighters – which had only really been cemented in the previous couple of years – series opener *Fatal Fury: King Of Fighters* was designed by Takashi Nishiyama, creator of the original 1987 *Street Fighter*. Having left Capcom, as his former colleagues worked on *Street Fighter II*, Nishiyama joined SNK, with a vision to make a game that offered a spread of characters that were more easily empathised with, and a story that players could feel and connect with a little more. A fighting game, he believed, could be about more than combos, blocks and special moves, bringing heart, narrative and worldbuilding.

> "RB2 WAS INCREDIBLY RUSHED DUE TO ITS SHORT DEVELOPMENT PERIOD"
> **YASUYUKI ODA, SNK**

Fatal Fury: King Of Fighters was unquestionably visually impressive, delightfully fluid, and certainly charismatic. It brought mechanical depth and nuance, but felt more fun and playful than many of its rivals. It was also a relatively stripped back affair, featuring just three player characters in the original version, along with a fairly contained scattering of enemy fighters. In time, however, the series would grow and evolve, expanding its combat complexity and cast diversity, organically establishing a game world that was loud, boisterous, and charming. *Fatal Fury* has always had a glint in its eye that made many other fighting series seem a little too staid and stony faced.

The first *Fatal Fury* was also SNK's debut fighting game on its then-new Neo GEO MVS arcade hardware. As the series found its footing and saw its reputation grow, it would inform SNK's journey to stand as a force that defined

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

FATAL FURY: KING OF FIGHTERS (PICTURED)

PLATFORM: ARCADE, VARIOUS

RELEASED: 1991

THE KING OF FIGHTERS '94

PLATFORM: ARCADE, VARIOUS

RELEASED: 1994

METAL SLUG: SUPER VEHICLE-001

PLATFORM: 1996

RELEASED: ARCADE, VARIOUS

» [Arcade] There's a leaderboard, but your mind will be on victory over point scoring.

» [Arcade] Brothers and series leads Terry and Andy Bogard return to take centre stage.

» [Arcade] New character Li Xiangfei is a practitioner of nam pai chuan martial arts.

the genre, teaching the team what made a truly brilliant competitive arcade fighter.

The beloved *King Of Fighters* series spun out of *Fatal Fury* – as well as from SNK's *Art Of Fighting* – and over time its characters would appear in all manner of the studio's games, with lead protagonist Terry Bogard and his red and white trucker's cap becoming something like unofficial mascots of the company.

The storyline of the early games reached its conclusion with the fourth mainline entry, *Real Bout Fatal Fury*, which also started a new narrative arc. But the series itself was far from done. 2025's *Fatal Fury: City Of The Wolves* marked the 12th main canon game. Add the *Fatal Fury* Special spin-off series, the masterfully elegant Neo Geo Pocket Color exclusive *Fatal Fury: First Contact*, the curious if imperfect 3D fighter *Fatal Fury: Wild Ambition*, and numerous ports and compilations, and you arrive at a software library that would certainly trouble the pockets of a completionist collector.

Which is the best *Fatal Fury* game? There are a lot of opinions out there. There is one *Fatal Fury* game, however, that excels in balancing arcade purity and mechanical nuance, offering something to delight hardcore players while serving as a welcoming gateway to less experienced arcade visitors. It's a game with a superbly varied cast, that oozes infectious personality, while looking fantastic and moving with consistent grace.

That game is 1998's *Real Bout Fatal Fury 2: The Newcomers* – commonly known as both *Real Bout 2* and *RB2* – and it was made incredibly fast. The team at SNK turned around the entire game in just four months. Development cycles at the time were impressively fleeting; a necessity of keeping ahead in the competitive world of arcade development, where the commercial gains were vast. But even that considered, to build a game with so much craft and legacy in a third of a year remains particularly impressive.

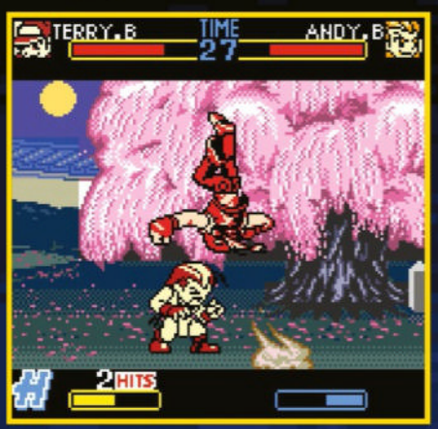
"*RB2* was incredibly rushed due to its short development period and the sudden need to include Alfred," remembers SNK producer and series stalwart Yasuyuki Oda, nodding to the game's powerful hidden boss character. "We realised users were growing tired of the *Real Bout* series, so for this title, we prioritised

POCKET POWER

HOW REAL BOUT 2 INSPIRED A PORTABLE GEM

While the Neo Geo Pocket Color only had two face buttons, its superb microswitched thumbstick made it perfect for portable fighting game action. That combination of inputs saw it host many fantastic streamlined takes on renowned fighting games, including *King Of Fighters R-2*, *SNK Vs Capcom: The Match Of The Millennium*, and *SNK Gals' Fighters*. In its own way, *Real Bout Fatal Fury 2: The Newcomers* made its way to the Neo Geo Pocket Color, albeit heavily reworked as *Fatal Fury: First Contact*,

The rostrum of fighters is stripped back – while a new combatant named Lao has been added – but the gameplay in *First Contact* is notably similar to *Real Bout 2*. The line switching system isn't present, but the similarities remain striking. Even the audio has been taken from the *Real Bout* series, carefully reworked for those tiny little speakers. *First Contact* might be trumped in terms of fighting finesse by Pocket Color classics such as *King Of Fighters R-2* and *SNK Gals' Fighters* – and it is largely made up of sprites from existing Neo Geo Pocket games. And yet *Fatal Fury: First Contact* really is a superb game ideally pitched for play on the go – and it remains relatively affordable, considering the system's high game prices.

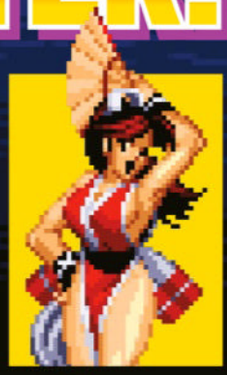


CHOOSE YOUR FIGHTER!

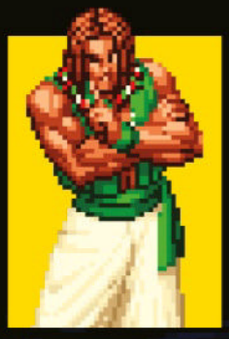
TERRY BOGARD
■ Star of every *Fatal Fury* and *King Of Fighters* game and something of an unofficial SNK company mascot, American powerhouse Terry Bogard is the Neo Geo company's cheerful, upbeat hero.

ANDY BOGARD
■ Known as 'The Human Weapon', Terry's fearsome younger brother brings a distinct fighting style that is deeply informed by traditional martial arts, and largely free of his sibling's street brawling methods.

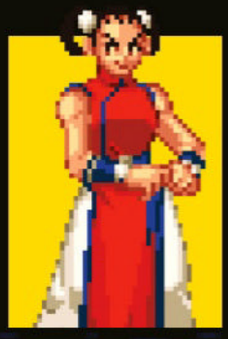
MAI SHIRANUI
■ One of *Fatal Fury*'s most famed fighters, Mai Shiranui has developed a style of fighting informed by both ninja traditions and Japanese dance; fitting for the final Shiranui ninja heiress.



BOB WILSON
■ A full-contact capoeira machine, Bob Wilson might outshine Terry Bogard when it comes to his happy-go-lucky demeanour. When it comes down to it, however, he is a remarkably powerful, acrobatic combatant.

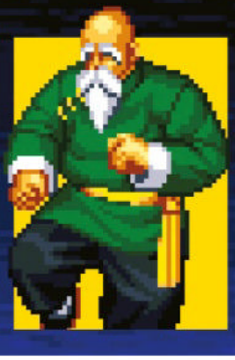


LI XIANGFEI
■ Boisterous and eccentric, Li Xiangfei is one of *Real Bout 2*'s new fighters. She stands out as a specialist in the relatively modern style of nam pai chuan Chinese martial arts.

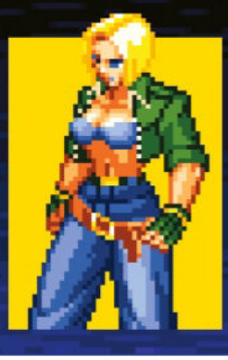


CHENG SINZAN
■ Looks can be deceiving. Cheng Sinzan may be an unassuming businessman, but he is also a master of the chuan style of tai chi, who can adapt his body size on the fly.

TUNG FU RUE
■ A veteran master, Tung Fu Rue has variously played trainer to *Fatal Fury* characters Geese Howard, Jeff Bogard and Cheng Sinzan. His mastery of energy more than borders on the mystical.



BLUE MARY
■ A maestro of the Soviet sambo fighting style, Blue Mary arrived in the world of *Fatal Fury* as a detective. She serves up a friendly demeanour – but is also known for breaking opponents' bones.



SOKAKU MOCHIZUKI
■ While Sokaku Mochizuki is a specialist in the very real Bōjutsu stick fighting martial art, he is also happy to summon ghosts and demons – including evil ones – to give him the edge in battle.

» [Arcade] New character Rick Strowd (left) is fascinating to fight against – and play as.

polishing it as a fighting tool above all else, and developed it intensely all at once."

The result certainly didn't feel rushed, with a carefully balanced combatant rostrum, and a delicate refinement of several of the series' defining elements, such as the Multi-line system, that across various entries let players hop in and out of two or more movement planes. Leaping from the foreground plane to the background plane, for example, might let you dodge attacks, move around a player and set up something of an ambush, or even fight across the lanes.

> "WE PRIORITISED POLISHING IT AS A FIGHTING TOOL ABOVE ALL ELSE"
> **YASUYUKI ODA, SNK**

Real Bout Fatal Fury 2: The Newcomers stripped the Multi-line system back, making it less confusing and complex, and more effective as a strategic device. "In previous titles, the strategic decision making that went into the line system was a little weak, so we wanted to improve that for this title and make it meld better with the rest of the battle," Oda reveals.

That effort was certainly worthwhile. Players can still move between front and back planes on most stages – though some deliberately only offer a single line – but characters can only stay in the background one at a time, for a limited time, and with their move list reduced while there. Special Sway Attacks where the player could lunge at an opponent across the planes were still possible, but the overall effort was to strip back the system. The result ended up being not less, but rather more. With the Multi-line system simplified, players could more readily focus on using movement between planes as a simple, fast way to evade and surprise enemies, rather than get lost to systemic complexity.

Other elements of the *Real Bout* games were also meticulously pruned back, demonstrating the team's knack for implementing learnings as the series progressed. In 1995's *Real Bout Fatal Fury* players could earn sudden ring-out victories by smashing their opponents through scenery elements such as barriers – granting an instant round victory that could feel wildly exciting for

MEET THE CORE FIGHTER ROSTER OF REAL BOUT 2

DUCK KING

■ Another of *Fatal Fury*'s friendly faces, the oddly named Duck King is a vibrantly colourful street punk who has developed break dancing into a fighting style not dissimilar to capoeira.

RYUJI YAMAZAKI

■ Starting out as a sub-boss in *Fatal Fury 3*, Ryuji Yamazaki is a street fighting machine, driven by materialism. He's not easy to like, but packs a hell of a punch.

FRANCO BASH

■ Seemingly a product of nominative determinism, the hulking Mr Bash is a surprisingly speedy kickboxing unit, who is something of a fiend when it comes to rapid-fire combos.

RICK STROWD

■ This Native American boxer is notable for being the second main character to debut in *RB2*. The acclaimed boxer is known as the 'White Wolf of the Ring' and is keen to fight Terry Bogard.

HON-FU

■ The hard-working, nunchuck-wielding Hong Kong detective Hon-Fu practises a fast, dynamic form of kung fu, and is perfect if you want a character that provides both pace and power.

JIN CHONREI

■ A practitioner of a fictional kung fu style, and master of chi energy, Jin Chonrei was reportedly intended to be a character with a split personality. Eventually, SNK spilt that idea into twin brothers instead.

JIN CHONSHU

■ Jin Chonshu is the younger twin sibling of Jin Chonrei. Chonshu mirrors much of his brother's distinct fighting style, although he has a little more emphasis on telekinetic and teleportation powers.

KIM KAPHWAN

■ Blending traditional taekwondo with acrobatic movements, Kim Kaphwan is guided by a strong sense of justice, and across the *Fatal Fury* series, he's proven himself as a capable aerial warrior.

JOE HIGASHI

■ Known as 'The Young Champ of Muay Thai', Joe Higashi brings a pure love for the sport of combat, youthful enthusiasm, and the ability to summon hurricanes. It has turned out to be a powerful combination.

the victor, and infuriatingly unjust for the loser. In the hyper competitive world of arcade play, that felt especially brutal – even undermining of something that many felt was the very essence of the arcade experience; the sense of a clash of skill over a level playing field. On the home-console releases players appeared less bothered. For more casual players, achieving a ring-out could feel like unleashing a devastating attack without so much need for learning high-end play.

Seemingly identifying that dynamic as an area with capacity for improvement, when the follow-up *Real Bout Fatal Fury Special* arrived in 1997, characters would become stunned by a barrier rather than knocked out. That felt fairer, but could still pivot a battle in a way that felt contrary to the very spirit of fighting games. By the time *Real Bout Fatal Fury 2: The Newcomers* arrived the following year, barriers were gone altogether. Again, less was arguably more, the change bringing greater balance and consistency of pacing and flow to matches. "Since *Fatal Fury* was originally an arcade game, there was significant backlash at the time to mechanics that led to a sudden game over, such as the ring-out," confirms Oda. "On the other hand, mechanics like this got a lot of praise on home consoles because players could repeatedly aim for them and enjoy them as many times as they'd like."In the end, stripping ring-outs and barrier stuns from the game entirely left an arcade pure, mechanically deep game that also delivered an elegance of design that greater numbers of casual players could get their heads around, without devotees feeling their beloved *Fatal Fury* had been in any way watered down. Indeed, that audience was gifted a more authentic arcade experience.

Real Bout Fatal Fury 2: The Newcomers also exemplifies the hallmarks of SNK's best games. It is not only a very visually stylish game; the detail of the pixel art is remarkable, each background boiling with detail that made the settings feel like complete, lived in places. All these years on, it's still possible for experienced players to spot a detail they never before noticed nestled in plain sight. The animation, meanwhile, jostles and bounces with such energy, character, and conviction that it capably communicates all the charisma and personality that made *Fatal Fury* stand out

» [Arcade] With a 'best of three' round structure, *RB2* deeply respects the conventions of the genre.

THE NEWCOMERS RETURN

FATAL FURY REAL BOUT 2 IS BACK. WHY NOW?

Recently, *Fatal Fury Real Bout 2: The Newcomers* re-entered the ring, with a Steam release created by developer Code Mystics. At a surface level little has changed. The visuals, fighter rostrum, and gameplay are retained. What has been added is rollback netcode, promising smooth online matches, effectively unleashing the game into the modern connected era. But with so many celebrated Neo Geo games to potentially port to PC, why did Code Mystics decide now was the time for *Real Bout 2*'s return?

"*Real Bout Fatal Fury 2* marks the completion of the *Real Bout* series, with a balancing of all the characters returning from *Real Bout Fatal Fury Special*, and very fast-paced gameplay," enthuses studio producer Laurent Vernézy. "We came recently to the conclusion that *RB2* needed to return on modern platforms."

As well as the addition of online play, Code Mystics has also fleshed out the practice mode, added a gallery, implemented Achievements and made secret boss Alfred more readily playable.

"As Alfred was not originally meant to be playable on Neo Geo, our developer had to find the pieces in the game code to make Alfred playable, then to set a way to make him appear, and ensure both his colours were correctly displayed," Laurent explains. "This was quite a challenge, but everything ended well." Grab the game on Steam and find out for yourself.

» [PC] While the game looks unchanged, behind-the-scenes rollback netcode allows for online matches. Needless to say, it's a big deal for fans of the series.

» [Arcade] Many of the more powerful attacks expertly showcase the quality of the pixel art.

» [Arcade] Duck King celebrates yet another victory. We just want to know who styles his hair.

from the crowd. That achievement is all the more impressive considering that the game itself launched in 1998 on arcade hardware that had arrived in 1990. In that era, that time period is a vast chasm in terms of the progression of arcade hardware. And yet *Real Bout Fatal Fury 2: The Newcomers* looked and moved considerably better than many contemporary titles launched on much more advanced hardware. "Since by that point the team was so used to the hardware, we could determine the most efficient way to make use of the console's graphic systems and where to allocate the visual memory needed for a good-looking game," offers Oda. "The culmination of all of that effort was the last title in the *Fatal Fury* series – *Mark Of The Wolves*".

1999's *Garou: Mark Of The Wolves* was arguably even prettier than its forebear, taking a distinct stylistic, more hard-bitten bent while dropping every character from the rostrum apart from Terry Bogard. *Fatal Fury* was taking a new direction that initially appeared to be short lived. It even dropped '*Fatal Fury*' from its title – although some versions of *Mark Of The Wolves* such as the Dreamcast port did retain the series' moniker. Despite all those changes, *Mark Of The Wolves* owes much to the quality *RB2* asserted – something that might have even bought the team more time on *Real Bout 2*'s immediate sequel. "Players were beginning to get tired of graphic re-use from *Fatal Fury 3* onwards, and we also managed to secure a larger amount of development time," says Oda of the creation of *Mark Of The Wolves*. "With this, we decided to shift all of our focus on to a new title with a brand-new direction."

> "RB2 IS A MASTERPIECE OF THE FIGHTING GAME GENRE"
> **LAURENT VERNÉZY, CODE MYSTICS**

While *Mark Of The Wolves* wrapped the *Fatal Fury* series, a quarter of a century on SNK's influential brawling world returned with *Fatal Fury: City Of The Wolves*; the first main canon entry not to see an arcade release. Powered by the Unreal Engine and dropping the

» [Arcade] *RB2* is equally grounded in real-world martial arts and mystical powers.

» [Arcade] Even the closest of brothers can find themselves scrapping. Andy and Terry are no exception.

traditional pixel-art look, it appears very different to *Real Bout Fatal Fury 2: The Newcomers*. Extending the *Wolves* arc, it shares little cast with *RB2* – though a few classic names reappear, such as Mai Shiranui and Joe Higashi. It would be an overenthusiastic overstatement to draw too direct a line between *RB2* and *City Of The Wolves*. And yet the latter's vibrancy, energy, and suitability to series newcomers and hardcore *Fatal Fury* fans alike? There certainly appears to be a healthy dose of *Real Bout 2*'s DNA in *City Of The Wolves*.

Speaking of 2025 *Fatal Fury* releases, *Real Bout 2* itself was reborn this year, with a quality Steam port handled by developer Code Mystics, presumably under the watchful eye of SNK (see The Newcomers Returns panel). And when it came to picking the perfect classic *Fatal Fury* game to be reborn and embellished with the likes of online competitive play, the choice was fairly simple.

"*Real Bout Fatal Fury 2* is a very well-balanced versus fighting game (any character can compete) with very charismatic game characters such as [the] worldwide known Terry Bogard and Mai Shiranui, all drawn in beautiful pixel art," states Code Mystics producer Laurent Vernézy. "With its Combination Attacks mechanic, any player can easily pull out combinations of normal moves. The pace of the fights is very fast, and incites players to rematch as soon as their match has ended. *RB2* is a masterpiece of the fighting game genre by SNK, and we really hope a lot of players will discover or rediscover it via this new iteration."

There has perhaps never been a better time to enjoy *Fatal Fury*. The Steam port offers a fantastic entry point to both a series highlight and a generous genre gateway, while *City Of Wolves* grants you a taste of the cutting edge of the fighting game world. Start with *RB2* right now, and in no time at all you might find yourself falling for the wider series, making your way into other SNK fighters, and embracing works from other developers, such as *Street Fighter*. Who knows, you might be at the start of your own journey to the competitive stage. And if you already know Terry and his co-stars well, those online matches make it a perfect time to return to *Real Bout Fatal Fury 2: The Newcomers*.

» [Arcade] The game so often excels at delivering dramatic close-call third round finishes.

» [Arcade] Many of the fighters such as Bob Wilson bring a highly acrobatic playstyle to the game.

» [Arcade] It isn't all about Terry Bogard. Fan favourite Mai returns, powerful as ever.

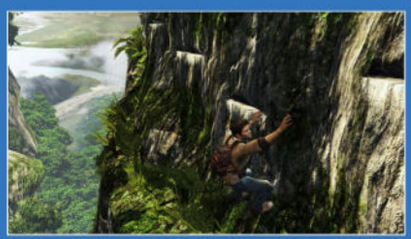
» [Arcade] The attract screens showcase plenty you can learn, so keep an eye on them.

PlayStation Vita

» **MANUFACTURER:** Sony » **YEAR:** 2011
» **COST:** £229.99 (launch, Wi-Fi only model), £90+ (today, boxed), £65+ (today, unboxed)

Though the PSP didn't manage to unseat Nintendo as the dominant force in handheld gaming, it was a popular machine, so it's understandable that Sony didn't change too much for its follow-up. The analogue slider was replaced with two proper sticks, both touch-screen and motion control features were added, and you could even add a SIM card for 3G mobile internet access. However, it was the beefy hardware under the hood that was the real draw, refreshing the PSP's pitch of console-quality gaming on the go for a new generation.

The Vita was a powerhouse, and early games demonstrated that well. However, the system struggled due to the increasing popularity of free-to-play mobile phone games and the high price of the hardware – not helped by its proprietary memory cards. Support from major developers quickly dried up, but the Vita earned a niche audience thanks to its vibrant indie game scene, as well as a wealth of RPGs and visual novels born from the system's greater success in Japan. Ultimately though, the console's underwhelming performance led Sony to exit the handheld console market.



ESSENTIAL GAME

Uncharted: Golden Abyss

Thanks to the Vita's commercial trajectory, a quirk of the library is that the earliest games are generally the platform's most impressive. *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* is a great example of that, offering a full-fat *Uncharted* experience that looks incredible. It's not quite as strong as Naughty Dog's efforts on the home consoles, leaning a bit too hard into trying to show off all of the Vita's features at times, such as with the unnecessary implementation of tilt controls. However, it's a worthy side story and one that remains exclusive to the hardware.

PlayStation Vita fact

■ TV output via a dedicated cable was originally considered for the PlayStation Vita, but Sony instead chose to release the dedicated PlayStation TV micro-console for this purpose.

NETWORK: 802.11B/G/N WI-FI, 3G MOBILE (DEPENDING ON MODEL)
PROCESSOR: 32-BIT QUAD-CORE ARM CORTEX-A9 MPCORE CPU
STORAGE: PROPRIETARY VITA MEMORY CARD (UP TO 64GB)
GRAPHICS: POWERVR SGX543MP4+ (128MB VIDEO RAM),
POWER: 2200MAH LITHIUM ION RECHARGEABLE BATTERY, APPROX 3-5 HOURS PLAY TIME
OTHER: TWO 640X480 CAMERAS (ONE USER-FACING, ONE EXTERNAL-FACING)
MEDIA: ROM CARTRIDGE (UP TO 32GB)
DISPLAY: 960X544
RAM: 512MB

SUPPLIED BY
EVAN AMOS

» [PC] It ain't no man [Wrong franchise – Ed].

» [PC] Protecting Sarah Connor in Bethesda's freshman *Terminator* game.

THE HISTORY OF TERMINATOR GAMES

SINCE THE DEBUT OF THE 1984 MOVIE, TERMINATOR VIDEOGAMES HAVE APPEARED WITH EVERY SUBSEQUENT INSTALMENT. MUCH LIKE THE FILMS THEMSELVES, IT'S BEEN AN ERRATIC AND SOMETIMES BIZARRE JOURNEY. RETRO GAMER STEPS BACK (OR IS IT FORWARD?) IN TIME TO INVESTIGATE

WORDS BY GRAEME MASON

» [Amiga] One hit from the truck and it's game over in the underwhelming *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*.

» [Amiga] Taking on the T-1000 in hand-to-hand combat in Ocean's *Terminator 2* game.

Lightning arcs across the dark sky as a garbage truck goes about its early morning duties. The driver flees as a magnetic ball, a glowing transport of matter through time, materialises, revealing its passenger. It is the arrival of the Terminator, and cinema will never be the same again. Directed by James Cameron and starring Arnold Schwarzenegger in the titular role, the Terminator rampages through Eighties Los Angeles as it pursues its singular quest: to kill the mother-to-be of John Connor, the human resistance leader, thus ensuring the machines' domination over humankind forevermore. "I was in Kingston with a friend," remembers David Perry, programmer of the 1992 Sega game based on *The Terminator*, "and to get out of the rain, we went into a cinema to watch something called *The Terminator*. We knew absolutely nothing about it, sat down and watched it in an empty cinema. It blew our minds."

While *The Terminator* was a decent-sized hit – especially on video – it wasn't until 1991's sequel, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, that the series properly registered in the public consciousness. "I was lucky enough to see a private viewing [of *Terminator 2*] shortly before we finished the game," recalls Jas Austin, coder of the 1992 *T2* Game Box game. "I thought it was a fantastic action film that had a great twist with Arnie being the protector this time around." Mike Tucker, design director and programmer on Bitmap Bureau's imminent *Terminator* game, *Terminator 2D: No Fate*, adds, "I vaguely remember watching the first *Terminator* movie at a young age, possibly on VHS or late-night TV back in the Eighties. But I distinctly recall going to the cinema to watch the sequel at Southampton's long-gone ABC cinema. I still recall the hype surrounding the release to this day."

As the sequel became a monumental success (despite its huge cost), the *Terminator* games came thick and fast, starting at a fledgling American software company called Bethesda Softworks. Formed in 1986, Bethesda began life publishing sports games, most notably a series of ice hockey simulations, such as *Wayne Gretzky Hockey*, and **Retro Gamer** spoke to its founder, Christopher Weaver. "Sometimes when you don't know [about a particular industry], it's beneficial because you're not artificially stopping yourself from doing something that more experienced people would probably counsel you against," he says, echoing his background in communications engineering before entering the world of videogames. "And at the time, Canal Plus owned the rights for the original *Terminator* movie, which many of us loved, and thought would make a great game." Eventually, Christopher cold-called Rand Marlis of CLC Creative Licensing – the man holding the reins of multiple licensors, including *The Terminator*. "[Rand] was actually aware of us and our ice hockey games, saw we were young and small, and that meant more to him than being a public company. In those days, it was possible to impress people not necessarily with what you'd done on a grand scale, but that you believed you could perform in an area." Following their handshake-confirmed deal, Bethesda produced the first *Terminator* game, based on the initial 1984 film, in 1991.

> "I FEEL WE MANAGED TO CAPTURE THE LOOK AND SPIRIT OF THE FILM"
> JAS AUSTIN

Directed and programmed by the late Julian LeFay, *The Terminator* was a then-ambitious open-world game in which the player takes on the role of Kyle Reese, sent back in time to protect Sarah Connor, or as the Terminator, sent back to do precisely the opposite. Eschewing the gritty urban backdrop of the movie, *The Terminator* takes place in an uncharacteristically sunny and green Los Angeles, but nonetheless does a decent job of evoking the film's spirit. Both Reese and the Terminator can buy or steal weapons from shops, and must evade the attention of local law enforcement while attempting to complete their respective missions.

Bethesda's *The Terminator* became a moderate hit, thanks in no small part to the phenomenal success of the film sequel, released in the summer of 1991. As Mike mentions above, the hype was unreal, making it a no-brainer for UK software house Ocean to license the film for home-computer games, to variable degrees of success.

Terminator 2: Judgment Day incorporates the familiar Ocean multi-genre gameplay – including fighting, driving and puzzle levels, repeated in slightly different form over the course of the game. Despite an overall score of 88%, Spectrum mag *Crash* cited *Terminator 2* as "lacking in gameplay",

with *Amiga Power* echoing this sentiment for the 16-bit game, concluding it was "such a disappointment when the movie managed to confound all doubters".

In the arcades, Midway produced a timely lightgun arcade unit with completely different gameplay from the Ocean game. Here, one or two players grab a machine gun and battle against Terminators, SWAT soldiers and more in a frantic and supremely challenging adventure across time. "That was the first *Terminator* game I played," remembers Mike. "I thought it did a pretty good job of capturing the essence of the film with its digitised graphics and speech."

» [Arcade] The lightgun *T2* game proved popular in arcades.

The Ocean deal didn't include the commendable Nintendo Game Boy version, published by LJN and developed by Bits Studios' Jas Austin. "We worked from the film script and some basic storyboards," recalls Jas. "We were given free rein on the design, so I picked out the key scenes that I thought would make good game levels." The result was a familiar yet well-received side-scrolling platformer, with its action broken up by chip rewire puzzle stages. "I feel we managed to capture the look and spirit of the film, although one weak part was the final fight with the T-1000," admits Jaz. "I did it at the end of a fairly short development time, so it was more than likely rushed." Meanwhile, buoyed by the success of its first *Terminator* game, Bethesda was already forging ahead with its next. As the movie sequel busily broke box office records, 1992 was shaping up to be a big year for the franchise on consoles and computers; but bizarrely, it was the original film that was getting some more pixelated attention.

Released in Europe during the late summer of 1992, Virgin's *The Terminator* cemented the movie as a bona fide gaming series. "It was the classic line, 'Want to work on a new console?'" smiles its programmer, David Perry. "To which we replied, 'Yes!' Then it arrives, and the programming manual is in Japanese. Did we bite off more than we could chew? Almost – *The Terminator* was an insane learning curve on the new hardware."

"THE TERMINATOR WAS AN INSANE LEARNING CURVE ON THE NEW HARDWARE"
DAVID PERRY

With Nick Bruty on art duties and Tommy Tallarico handling audio, the former picked out the best scenes from the movie in terms of both potential gameplay and art. But there was a problem. "We thought gamers wanted to be *The Terminator*, but we were told the licensing didn't include Arnold Schwarzenegger – nightmare!" laments David. "We decided to pivot to Sarah Connor, but they didn't have rights for Linda Hamilton either – double nightmare!" David and his colleagues plumped for Kyle Reese by default, sidestepping the character's (spoiler alert) death and the lack of (mechanical) enemies. "We were happy to be making the game," notes David, "but it really was an uphill struggle to make it all make sense." To their credit, *The Terminator* at least faithfully follows the plot of the movie, culminating in the famous scene inside a steel mill.

Virgin's *The Terminator* arrived on the Sega Mega Drive, Master System and Game Gear in 1992, while the series made its home Nintendo debut with – confusingly – first *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, followed a few months later by the inferior *The Terminator*. Meanwhile, PC gamers got Bethesda's follow-up, the superb *Terminator 2029*, in the same year, followed by an expansion, *Operation Scour*, in 1993, along with a sequel proper, *Terminator: Rampage*, complete with a lovely Simon Bisley cover. "We did a number of *Terminator* licences," adds Christopher, "as they trusted us after the first time because we didn't do anything stupid."

1993 also saw the release of Virgin's brilliant Mega-CD *Terminator* game and Mindscape's not-quite-so-brilliant Super Nintendo version. The same year, the Mega Drive and the SNES also got official *T2* movie conversions, although these were met with poor reviews. Particularly damning was *Mean Machines*' look at the Sega Mega Drive game, "An outright disaster for Acclaim who ought to bin this title before anyone notices it exists," the magazine raged. Despite the lack of a lightgun, Acclaim's ports of the arcade game met with a friendlier reception the same year.

» [Master System] The Terminators don't look quite as imposing in the Master System home port of *T2: The Arcade Game*.

» [Mega Drive] Kyle Reese battles Terminators in their underground base.

» [NES] Battling another Terminator in the grimy future.

NOT A ROBOT

BUCKLE UP AND GRAB THE DOG AS RETRO GAMER LOOKS AT ITS FAVOURITE VIDEOGAME TERMINATORS

T-800

■ The grunt of the Skynet forces, the T-800's head houses a neural net processor and is capable of advanced machine learning. Strong and powerful, it's the most common enemy in *Terminator* games, its glittering chassis and crimson eyes instilling fear in even the bravest resistance soldier.

T-800 INFILTRATOR

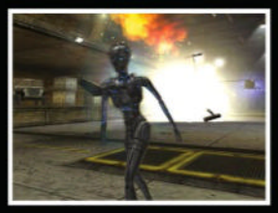
■ The classic. Wrapped in Arnold Schwarzenegger's muscular form, this stealth variant boasts a triple-armoured endoskeleton with an organic sheath, making it indistinguishable from a regular person to the human eye. While its skin is vulnerable, it feels no pain and is designed to be a merciless killing machine.

T-850

■ Featuring in the movie *Rise Of The Machines*, the T-850 is a slightly improved version of the T-800, conveniently aged by around ten years, suiting Arnie's return to the role in the third film. It's slightly stronger and possesses better regenerative powers, but has a near-identical endoskeleton beneath its human-like flesh.

T-1000

■ Made famous by actor Robert Patrick in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, the T-1000 is composed of a liquid form called mimetic polyalloy, which can reform into virtually any shape – or person – of a similar size. Fast and extremely dangerous, it features in the official *T2* videogame adaptations of the early Nineties.



T-X

■ The T-X, or Terminatrix, is a female version of the Terminator, and appears in both *Rise Of The Machines* and its pseudo-sequel, *Terminator 3: The Redemption*. Specialising in direct assassinations, the T-X has the same mimetic polyalloy as the T-1000 in addition to other onboard weaponry.

HUNTER KILLER

■ These flying predators scour the skies looking for humans to strafe with their powerful lasers and bombs. Impossibly speedy, they make a memorable debut in Sega's *Terminator* games, strafing the player whenever they dare to cross open land, and feature intermittently throughout the games.

T-1

■ This robust, tank-like Terminator appears in various forms throughout both the movies and games, and is pictured here in its *Terminator 3: The Redemption* form. Armed with cannons and missiles, it is a formidable but sluggish opponent, sometimes also known as an HK-Tank.

T-400 & T-500

■ These early models of Terminator appear exclusively in 2002's *Dawn Of Fate*. Cumbersome and ugly, they're nevertheless strong and fearsome, especially in close combat. They aren't much use in infiltrating human bases due to their creaking limbs, and can be dispatched by targeting their exposed wiring.

T-600

■ The T-600 is an early infiltrator model, covered in rubber instead of synthetic human flesh. "We spotted them easy," says Kyle Reese in *The Terminator* movie, and T-600s appear in Bethesda's *Future Shock* and *SkyNET*. While not the best at infiltration, they're still lethal.

T-900

■ A sleeker and better-protected upgrade from the T-800 and T-850, the T-900 is similar in appearance to the non-fleshy T-X unit (which it precedes), with its oval skull and armoured body unit. Its plasma fusion reactor gives its torso a unique glow, the colour depending on its designation.

» [PC] *Terminator 2: Judgment Day – Chess Wars* proved disappointing for both Chess and *Terminator* fans.

» [Game Gear] Are you ready to take on the many hoodlums in *Terminator 2*?

» [Mega-CD] Blasting a Terminator in the excellent Mega CD update of *The Terminator*. It's now quite an expensive game.

» [PC] Kill this Terminator and you can enter the complex.

» [PC] Breaking into a prisoner complex in *Terminator: SkyNET*.

» [PC] This Terminator is barring your entrance to a complex. Kill it!

NICE NIGHT FOR A WALK (WITH A GAME BOY)

RETRO GAMER LOOKS AT THE BEST TERMINATOR GAMES TO PLAY ON THE GO

THE TERMINATOR

TIGER ELECTRONICS
HANDHELD, 1988

■ Dedicated LCD games were just about holding on by the late-Eighties, and Tiger didn't give up easily, flooding the market into the following decade. As you'd expect, this *Terminator* adaptation is limited, but somehow its gallery shooter gameplay entertains, at least for a short while, thanks chiefly to its variety of weaponry.

TERMINATOR 2: JUDGMENT DAY

GAME BOY, 1991

■ Despite not following the plot of the film to any meaningful degree, this is a fun movie adaptation. Stepping into the shoes of the T-800, the game mixes eras across Cyberdyne's offices, wastelands and a steel mill and controls well. While hardly ground-breaking, it's one of the better *T2* games.

TERMINATOR 2: JUDGMENT DAY

GAME GEAR, 1993

■ This Game Gear game, distinct from both the Game Boy and home computer *T2*s, was developed by Probe Software for publisher Acclaim and is a good-looking, if challenging, adaptation. From the truck stop to the steel mill, the T-800 leaps and runs nimbly as it protects both Sarah and John Connor.

TERMINATOR 3: RISE OF THE MACHINES

GAME BOY ADVANCE, 2003

■ Forced isometric games were almost as popular as side-on platformers on the GBA, but it was the first foray into the genre for the *Terminator* series. Developed separately from the home-console versions, it includes a fascinating mechanic where the player activates the Terminator's red-tinted vision to spot hidden items.

THE TERMINATOR

PSP, 2009

■ Also released on iOS and playable on the PlayStation 3, this PSP game shifts the action to a top-down view and transforms the gameplay into a twin-stick shooter. Published as a downloadable PlayStation Mini, it's a diverting albeit slightly monotonous shooter that's now a buried relic, withdrawn from online stores.

» [PC] Be wary of corners in *Terminator: Future Shock*.

» [PC] Are we too late for the latest Coldplay album?

Finally for 1993, two *Terminator* oddities. *Terminator 2: Judgment Day – Chess Wars* was a strange attempt to meld the ancient strategy game with the sci-fi series, resulting in a bland and incomprehensible result, not helped by (ironically) some poor tactical AI. Furthermore, Virgin's *RoboCop Versus The Terminator* pitched the chrome cop against all manner of robotic enemies, such as spiders, dogs and tanks, as well as villains from both series, including ED-209, Cain, and the T-800. While the Sega game veers away from its source material – the Dark Horse comic series – with RoboCop essentially responsible for the rise of Skynet, the Super Nintendo game focusses on another freedom fighter sent from the future, chased by Terminators with the aim of, well, terminating her. In both games, the player controls RoboCop, stomping through the streets and rubble of the future as it seeks to destroy the terrible artificial intelligence it helped create.

Let's pause for breath. It's been a frenzied two years, with gamers barely able to keep up with the onslaught of *Terminator* videogames. In the world of cinema, the dust finally began to settle on the incredible success of *Terminator 2*, and the third film began development, the games slowing to a trickle. It was left to Bethesda to continue with its first-person shooter games, becoming one of the first publishers to fully embrace proper 3D environments and characters. Set in a desolate, post-apocalyptic Los Angeles of 2015, *Terminator: Future Shock* places the player in the worn shoes of a veteran soldier in John Connor's resistance force as they try to end the cold, metallic yoke of Skynet. A year later, Bethesda released *SkyNET*, set once more in the grim, futuristic world, powered by an improved version of its native Xngine technology. With its superior resolution and gameplay, *SkyNET* was the apex of Bethesda's *Terminator* games – and also its last. "We were still a relatively small group, and we had brought in some new people for the challenge of building a role-playing style game," explains Christopher. Having released the first of its *Elder Scrolls* series a year earlier, Bethesda would soon build on *Arena* by releasing the sequel, *Daggerfall*, in 1996. "The quick answer was we got tired, the guys got tired [of *Terminator* games], and they felt they were becoming a punishment. They wanted to move on."

It wasn't just Bethesda that moved on – it seemed nobody wanted to touch the franchise after 1995, with no more games appearing until 2002. This might have been a legal issue – following the success of *Terminator 2*, an immediate sequel seemed inevitable. But then its production company, Carolco, went bust, and the rights sold off, stalling director James Cameron's plans for a third film. Then, in 2003, 12 years after the release of *Judgment Day*, *Terminator 3: Rise Of The Machines* finally saw release, to a muted reception. Jump back in time a year (don't forget to take your clothes off), and publisher Infogrames and developer Paradigm Entertainment released a prequel on PlayStation 2 and Xbox. Taking place before (or rather, after, but also before and after – do keep up) the events of the first movie, *The Terminator: Dawn Of Fate* features three playable characters, including Kyle Reese. Playing in third-person, the trio battles various Terminators before the game concludes with Reese sent back in time to prevent the T-800 from killing Sarah Connor, as in *The Terminator*. Laden with stodgy camera angles and frustrating controls, *Dawn Of Fate* unfortunately failed to take advantage of its solid scenario and hardly enthused gamers ahead of the incoming new movie. Directly licensed on the film, Atari's *Terminator 3: Rise Of The Machines* went down about as well, if not worse, than the movie. "Rarely – if ever – have we witnessed such a painful licensing gaff," noted Kristen Reed in Eurogamer's 1/10 review. "From the moment the first bullet leaves Arnie's gun, it's patently obvious you're in for a terrifying experience, but for all the wrong reasons." Featuring new weapons and enemies, 2004's *Terminator 3: The Redemption*, developed by *Dawn Of Fate*'s Paradigm Entertainment, was marginally better. The player controls a T-850 Terminator, commanding over 20 vehicles as it seeks to protect John Connor against the dreaded Skynet.

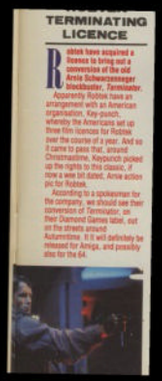
> "THE GUYS GOT TIRED [OF TERMINATOR GAMES], AND THEY FELT THEY WERE BECOMING A PUNISHMENT"
> CHRISTOPHER WEAVER

Redemption may have been an uptick, but the series in general was proving the adage about cynical videogame movie adaptations. As we move into the seventh generation of consoles, 2009's *Terminator: Salvation* ushered in a new era for the film series and was the first (and to date, only) *Terminator* movie not to feature Arnold Schwarzenegger, then serving as governor of California. Set in 2018, *Salvation* presents an even grittier picture of the post-apocalyptic future as Christian Bale's John Connor recruits a mysterious ally in rescuing Kyle Reese (Anton Yelchin) from the metal monsters. Developed by Sweden's Grin studio, it was the short-lived developer's final game and the last movie

» [PlayStation 2] 2002's *Dawn Of Fate* preceded the movies in the original timeline, but began a steady decline in the quality of the games.

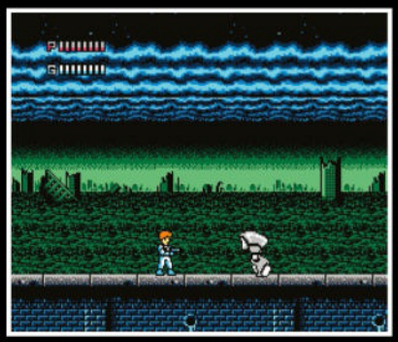
YOU'RE TERMINATED

RETRO GAMER REMEMBERS THE TERMINATOR GAMES THAT, LIKE SARAH CONNOR'S NAMESAKES, DIDN'T MAKE IT



Licensing issues are a common cause for canned videogames, and the *Terminator* franchise is no exception. Thanks to some excellent work by Stefan Gancer on the website Gaming Alexandria, we today know that NES publisher Sunsoft acquired the *Terminator* licence in late-1988, intending to bring the first *Terminator* game to the console the following year. Sadly for NES *Terminator* fans, licence owner Rand Marlis (the man who backed Christopher Weaver's Bethesda so firmly) wasn't impressed with the game's lack of connection to the movie's plot, and withdrew the licence, the game becoming the platformer, *Journey To Silius*.

Surprisingly, there was an even earlier attempt to bring the *Terminator* home, with UK publisher/developer Thor approaching the studios behind both *The Terminator* and *Dune*, only to be given a metallic cold shoulder (thanks to the fantastic Games That Weren't website for that one). Elsewhere, Virgin abandoned another NES game, its port of *RoboCop Versus The Terminator*, as the console slipped into terminal decline, while a report in April 1988's *Commodore User* confirmed that Robtek had acquired the *Terminator* licence and intended to release both an Amiga and C64 iteration of the movie. Neither surfaced, and why the deal fell through – if it existed in the first place – is a mystery. Keep an eye on gamesthatwerent.com/gtw64/the-terminator for updates.



» [NES] Sunsoft's *Journey To Silius*, which began life as a *Terminator* game.

from production company Halcyon, both of which ceased operating during or shortly after *Salvation*'s release. A neutral observer could be forgiven for thinking the *Terminator* franchise is cursed in every form.

Then, in 2015, the movie series was rebooted, with Schwarzenegger returning to the role that thrust the actor into the big time. Beyond a brace of mobile games (*Terminator Genisys: Revolution* and *Future War*), however, the world of videogames was not tempted at the time, the only notable *Terminator* games of the decade both coming in 2019: an arcade rail shooter called *Terminator: Salvation*, ten years after the movie's release and *Terminator: Resistance*, a reasonably received first-person shooter on Xbox One, PC and PlayStation 4. In the same year, the latest cinematic instalment, *Terminator: Dark Fate*, was released, eventually inspiring a new direction for the series in videogames. "We'd been discussing various IPs that we were interested in," says Mark Hardisty, senior producer on Slitherine's *Terminator: Dark Fate – Defiance*. "We reached out to Skydance, *Dark Fate*'s production company, and were fortunate enough to secure the rights to develop a game based on the *Dark Fate* timeline."

Slitherine pivoted away from the recent motley collection of third and first-person shooters, creating the franchise's first non-mobile RTS in 2024. "We wanted to lean into a more grounded, military-style take on the *Terminator* universe, and it felt like the perfect fit, aligning well with both the tone we wanted and the audience we were trying to reach," continues Mark. With its relatively undefined period in the timeline, there was more freedom for Slitherine, with players able to upgrade vehicles and weaponry. Despite the movie series entering the doldrums – thanks mainly to *Dark Fate*'s shocking box office performance – Slitherine continues to update *Defiance*, having recently released the *We Are Legion* DLC (allowing you to play from the Legion's perspective), and plans further campaign missions and modes.

» [PlayStation 5] *Terminator Resistance* continues the series into the latest console generation.

> "WE WANTED TO LEAN INTO A MORE GROUNDED, MILITARY-STYLE TAKE ON THE TERMINATOR UNIVERSE"
> MARK HARDISTY.

Today, the *Terminator* movie franchise remains dormant, although undoubtedly someone, somewhere is optimistically planning another film in the long-running series. Until then, we have Bitmap Bureau and Reef Entertainment's incoming *Terminator 2D: No Fate*, which looks to be evoking the spirit of classic arcade run-and-guns such as *Metal Slug*, *Contra* and *Rolling Thunder*. "There are definitely nods

» [PC] Slitherine's *Terminator: Dark Fate – Defiance* puts the player in command of the resistance.

» [PC] It might not be a spectacular game, but *Terminator: Resistance* is a lot of fun, being a solid first-person shooter with lots of action.

to other *Terminator* titles, but we'll leave those for players to discover!" grins Bitmap Bureau's Mike Tucker. For more information on *Terminator 2D: No Fate*, check out **Retro Gamer** 274.

Like the majority of later *Terminator* movies, Retro Gamer is faced with an awkward conclusion. History has not been kind to the games, but their role in one particular company's development cannot be overstated. "The timing was perfect, and as a stepping stone, [the *Terminator* games] were very important to Bethesda," observes Christopher Weaver. "It was the perfect era [for game development] and we were doing things that people hadn't done before. It was a challenge, one I said, 'Let's go do that,' to. And that's the story of Bethesda."

David Perry, whose first Mega Drive game, *The Terminator*, helped usher in that golden period for the series, says of the movie franchise, "Like the *Alien* movies, once James Cameron moved on, I think it generally went downhill. But I like the look of *Terminator 2D: No Fate* – I love retro platform shooters like *Metal Slug*, so this reminds me of those kinds of games."

Throughout the ups and downs, the flops and the successes, *Terminator* videogames have somehow clung on and continue to thrill gamers, backed by a unique and memorable villain that seems more likely with each passing day. In a world where we increasingly cannot trust what we see or read, thanks to the ever-increasing presence of AI, maybe a bit of Skynet blasting is just what we all need right now.

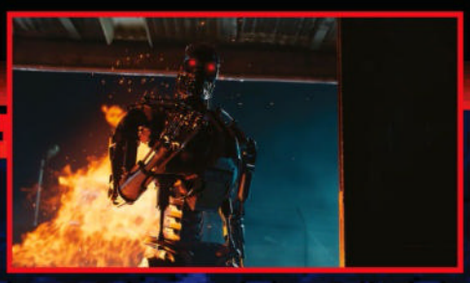
BANG ON

TERMINATOR 2 GAME BOY PROGRAMMER JAS AUSTIN ON THE PROBLEM WITH BANGS

"All the close-up images of the characters in the game had to be signed off by the actor's representatives," recalls Jas. "We submitted some art for Sarah Connor for approval. They came back with a comment, 'Her bangs are too small, make them bigger.' We thought it was an odd request, but we dutifully made her breasts a bit larger and resubmitted. Again, it came back with the same comment. So bigger 'bangs' and the image sent back again. This went on for a couple more rounds, and we were thinking this is getting crazy. So the last time, we made her breasts massive and waited. Still the same comment! I can't remember exactly how we came to the correct conclusion – I think somebody in the office must have told us 'bangs' meant fringe. So we quickly redrew her breasts back to the original size and her fringe a bit longer, and got the approval straight away. But I still can't believe they didn't spot or comment on her breast size – by the end, Sarah Connor had gone full-on Dolly Parton!"

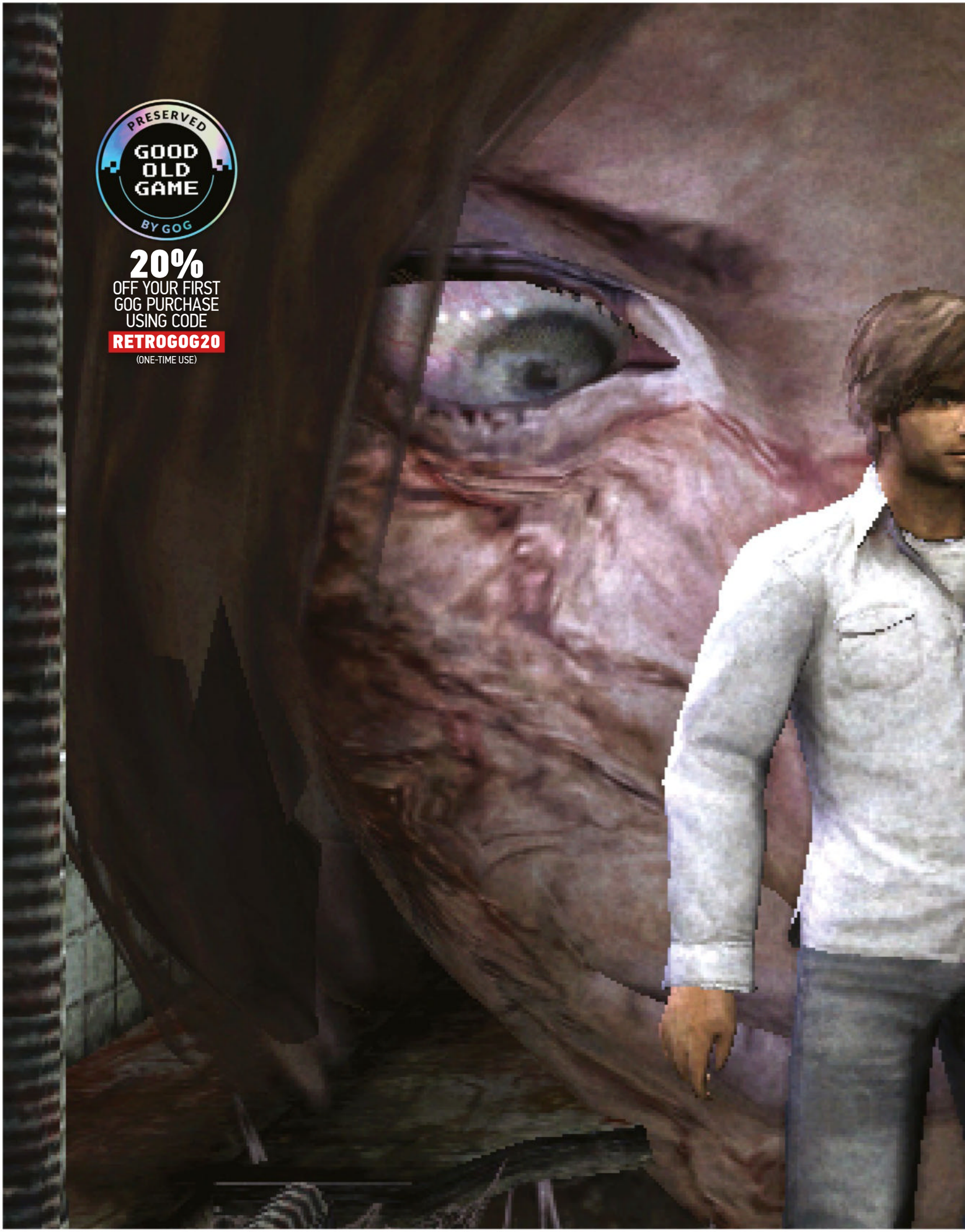
» [Game Boy] Sarah Connor, with her bangs present and correct.

» [PC] *Terminator Survivors* is an incoming open-world game by the developer Nacon. It's due to arrive in late 2025.



» [PC] Bitmap Bureau and Reef Entertainment's *Terminator 2D: No Fate* looks to recreate the hit movie in a retro style.

» [PC] Poor old Sarah Connor is trying to escape the T-1000 in *No Fate*, but the dastardly villain has managed to skewer her.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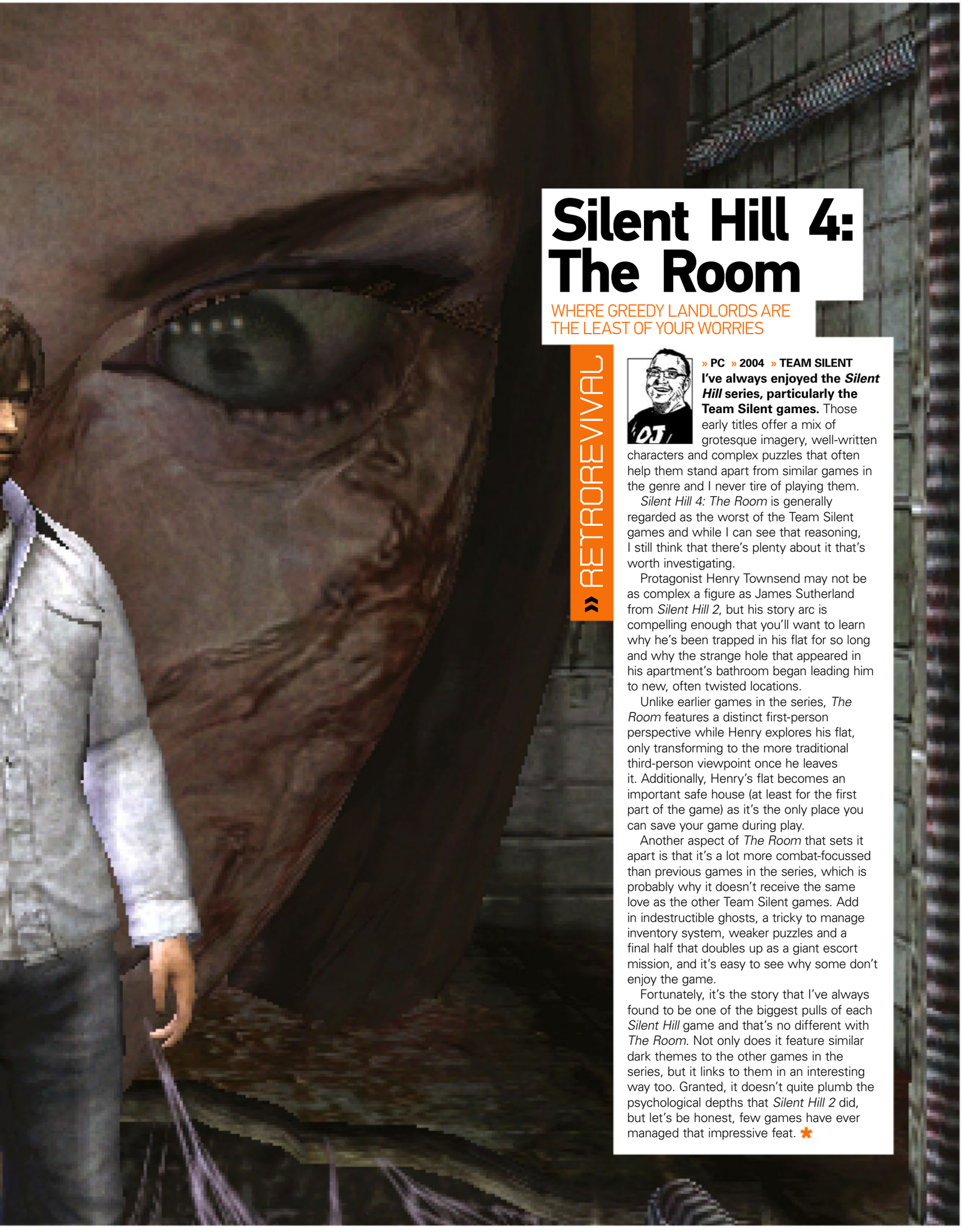


Silent Hill 4: The Room

WHERE GREEDY LANDLORDS ARE THE LEAST OF YOUR WORRIES

» PC » 2004 » TEAM SILENT

I've always enjoyed the *Silent Hill* series, particularly the Team Silent games. Those early titles offer a mix of grotesque imagery, well-written characters and complex puzzles that often help them stand apart from similar games in the genre and I never tire of playing them.

Silent Hill 4: The Room is generally regarded as the worst of the Team Silent games and while I can see that reasoning, I still think that there's plenty about it that's worth investigating.

Protagonist Henry Townsend may not be as complex a figure as James Sutherland from *Silent Hill 2*, but his story arc is compelling enough that you'll want to learn why he's been trapped in his flat for so long and why the strange hole that appeared in his apartment's bathroom began leading him to new, often twisted locations.

Unlike earlier games in the series, *The Room* features a distinct first-person perspective while Henry explores his flat, only transforming to the more traditional third-person viewpoint once he leaves it. Additionally, Henry's flat becomes an important safe house (at least for the first part of the game) as it's the only place you can save your game during play.

Another aspect of *The Room* that sets it apart is that it's a lot more combat-focussed than previous games in the series, which is probably why it doesn't receive the same love as the other Team Silent games. Add in indestructible ghosts, a tricky to manage inventory system, weaker puzzles and a final half that doubles up as a giant escort mission, and it's easy to see why some don't enjoy the game.

Fortunately, it's the story that I've always found to be one of the biggest pulls of each *Silent Hill* game and that's no different with *The Room*. Not only does it feature similar dark themes to the other games in the series, but it links to them in an interesting way too. Granted, it doesn't quite plumb the psychological depths that *Silent Hill 2* did, but let's be honest, few games have ever managed that impressive feat.

>> There's a lot to get through this month. Music and puzzling is blended in Lumines Arise, Nick tries out the latest Pokémon game and we find out if Lumo's sequel is a worthy follow-up

» [PC] You can now activate Burst, but do you fire it off now or wait until you hit 100%?

Lumines Arise

THE RHYTHM IS GOING TO GET YOU

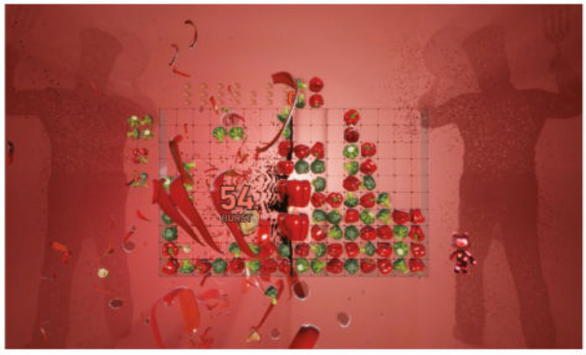
INFORMATION

- **SYSTEM:** PC
- **ALSO ON:** PS5
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PRICE:** £32.99
- **PUBLISHER:** ENHANCE
- **DEVELOPER:** ENHANCE, MONSTARS INC
- **BUY IT FROM:** ONLINE, RETAIL
- **PLAYERS:** 1-2

Not content with fusing *Tetris* and VR to great effect, Tetsuya Mizuguchi and his talented team at Enhance have pulled off the same trick again with his long-running puzzle series.

The most important thing to realise about *Lumines Arise* is that Mizuguchi and his team haven't dramatically reinvented it – because let's face it, there's no real need to. While it's not quite as simplistic as the brilliantly designed *Tetris* is, *Lumines*' core gameplay remains arguably as compelling and that certainly hasn't really been tinkered with for *Arise*.

» [PC] Burst is a great new mechanic and offers real risk versus reward play.



As a result you'll be manipulating your dual-coloured squares and trying to form larger blocks of the same colour before the game's Timeline sweeps across the screen and erases them, hopefully resulting in additional combos as new blocks form. It's a great concept and the new mechanics of *Arise* enhance, rather than simply change it.

In fact the biggest addition to *Arise* – outside of its move to VR of course – is the inclusion of the Burst mechanic, which greatly enhances your chance to create huge scores. As you create combos the Timeline will sport a slowly rising percentage bar. Get it to a 100% and the screen will pulse and you can pull off a Burst. The music changes and a number will appear above the Timeline. Any completed shapes won't disappear until the new Timeline number finally counts down after each pass, meaning there's potential to make a huge area of a single colour to score a massive number of points. Additionally, opposite-coloured blocks touching the Burst area will be pushed upwards, eventually falling down

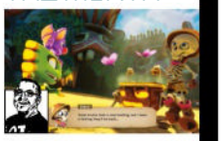
BRIEF HISTORY

» The original *Lumines: Puzzle Fusion* launched alongside the PSP in 2004 and became a big hit on the system. It was followed by numerous sequels, notably *Lumines Electronic Symphony* which included licensed music by artists such as The Chemical Brothers, Goldfrapp and The Beloved. And *Lumines Live!*, which was the first *Lumines* to feature online multiplayer.

» [PC] The skins in *Arise* are generally excellent, covering everything from dance music and soul to pop tunes and rockier stuff.

» [PC] While *Lumines Arise* plays great on Steam Deck, this particular level does cause framerate issues.

✱PICKS OF THE MONTH



DARRAN
Yooka-Replaylee
While I'd love an *Impossible Lair* sequel, this is a great update of the first game that fixes plenty of its original issues.

NICK
Pokémon Legends: Z-A
I may keep getting chased out of Wild Zones by angry Alphas, but I always feel like going back for another scrap.

» [PC] Dig Down is a fun mode where you have to clear blocks before the grid fills up.

» [PC] You can't see it here, but these backdrops look incredible in VR.

once the Timeline has finished, resulting in even more precious points based on how they land.

It might be the only new addition to the core mechanics, but Burst feels great to pull off (triggering it at a lower percentage means you don't get as many passes) and adds a huge level of strategy to the game. It works equally well in the new two-player mode Burst Battle, as Garbage piles up on either side of the playing area causing it to shrink in size unless you create blocks against the Garbage to remove it.

As good as *Arise*'s multiplayer options are, there's plenty to sink your teeth into with the game's single-player mode. Journey is the main focus, presenting you with a set number of skins to clear across an increasingly higher difficulty level. Cleared skins then move to the Playlist, where you can edit up to 12 different skins to play in one sitting. Once Journey is completed you'll unlock Survival, which challenges you to complete all the game's skins in a single sitting.

Challenges is another area of *Arise* which is not only filled with interesting tasks to complete, but teaches you some of the deeper skills that the game offers. Growth sees you dealing with increasingly larger blocks, Hatch requires you to break an egg whilst clearing blocks around it, Burst Rush has you trying to activate Burst as many times as possible, while Aquarium requires you to clear as many blocks as possible in one sweep of the Timeline. There's plenty of others to tackle and some of them are incredibly challenging to complete.

Of course, a *Lumines* game is nothing without great music, and *Arise* succeeds here as well. There's a staggering number of toe-tapping tunes across a variety of genres, from the optimistic beats of *Arise*, the pop-like, Rihanna-sounding *Sunset Pounding*, to the melancholic wistfulness of *Temple Bells* and the trance-like rhythm of *Spider Webs*.

If you are lucky enough to have access to VR, *Arise* has one final trick to pull. Like *Tetris Effect*, the use of VR helps to immerse you in the game, so gulls fly straight towards you as you fiddle blocks, dugongs glide gracefully above your head, while pieces of chopped fruit and veg barrel towards you as they're cleared from the playing area. The game plays perfectly well without VR, but its introduction does offer that extra level of immersion.

There's an expansive and very stable online mode to *Lumines Arise* as well, which features the ability to play Burst Battles online and take part in numerous challenges via an online leaderboard, further adding to the game's brilliantly longevity.

In a nutshell

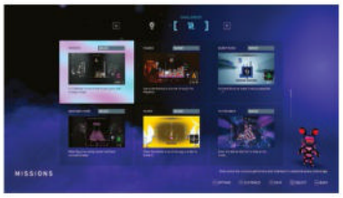
This is quite simply the best iteration of *Lumines* yet and we've already sunk a disgusting number of hours into it.

>> Score **90%**

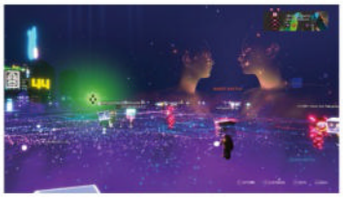
WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD
LUMINES: PUZZLE FUSION

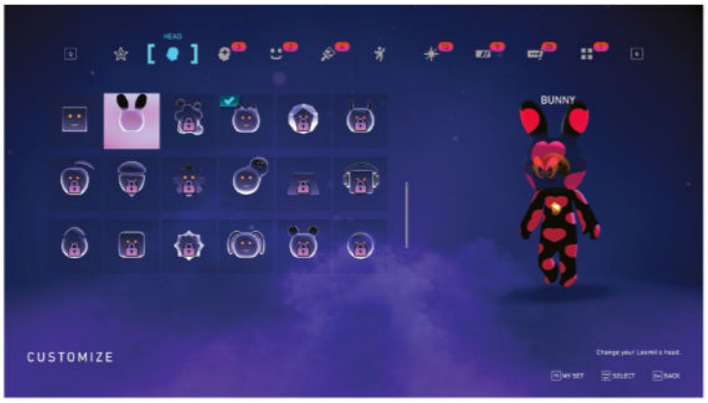
▼ SOMETHING NEW
TETRIS EFFECT: CONNECTED



» [PC] The Challenges section offers plenty of different missions and will improve your technique too.



» [PC] The online side of *Arise* is a neat community hub and features an excellent Burst Battle mode.



» [PC] You can customise your Loomii by unlocking all manner of extras through play.

PICK OF THE MONTH

Pokémon Legends: Z-A

THE SCORE TELLS HALF THE TAIL

INFORMATION

- **FORMAT:** SWITCH
- **ALSO ON:** SWITCH 2
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PRICE:** £49.99
- **PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO
- **DEVELOPER:** GAME FREAK
- **PLAYERS:** 1

***Pokémon Legends: Arceus* was our favourite *Pokémon* game in a long time, simply because it offered just enough fresh ideas to revitalise the well-worn *Pokémon* formula, and this is the sequel.** Set in the Kalos region, previously visited in *Pokémon X* and *Y*, you arrive as a tourist in Lumiose City but quickly become embroiled in the local problems – specifically, an ever-increasing number of wild Pokémon and worse, ones that have become able to use their Mega Evolution forms without a trainer. To combat this, the city has set up Wild Zones for the Pokémon to inhabit and is seeking to find strong trainers via the Z-A Royale, a competition in which you must climb from Rank Z to the very top.

The previous *Pokémon Legends* game overhauled the way you track and capture Pokémon, and *Z-A* completes the overhaul of the series template by adopting real-time battles. It's a significant change but one that instantly makes sense to series veterans – slower attacks have longer cool-down periods, defensive moves now have to be triggered at the right time, and missed attacks now relate directly to your position on the battlefield. Your opportunities to dip into the menu to use items are also limited.

Just as sneaking up on Pokémon gives you an advantage in capturing them, you can now sneak up on other trainers during the allotted overnight battle periods and get the jump with a surprise attack. Familiar features from the prior game return, most notably the terrifying Alphas, exceptionally tough and aggressive red-eyed Pokémon that will ruin your day completely.

» [Switch] Real-time battles and the return of Mega Evolutions distinguish *Pokémon Legends: Z-A* from its predecessor.

» [Switch] Though not ugly, Lumiose City suffers a little from a lack of detail and similar-looking streets.

Where *Pokémon Legends: Arceus* offered a series of large, disconnected environments to explore, Lumiose City is a fully connected open world. Unfortunately, the setting does rob the game of the sense of adventure that *Pokémon* games typically offer – Game Freak has tried to create variety with parks, graveyards and construction zones, but there's only so much that can be done within a coherent urban setting. It's not helped by the visuals, as the city's buildings suffer from flat texture work and uninteresting design. Fortunately, the performance is passable on Switch, with occasional drops from 30fps being noticeable but hardly ruinous.

Thankfully, Lumiose City is an interesting place to explore, packed with things to find – especially on the rooftops – and plenty of fun little side quests to tackle. The story is more interesting than the usual fare too, as you join a nice little group that genuinely cares about how the needs of people and Pokémon can be balanced. So while it's not much to look at and you never quite stop pining for the caves, forests and beaches commonly seen in the series, the game design still offers enough to hook you.

All in all, *Pokémon Legends: Z-A* has fully distinguished this sub-brand from the main turn-based adventures and is a fine swan song for the series' difficult Switch years, but it can't quite make the same impact as its predecessor.

» [Switch] Encounters with powerful Alpha critters like this Sharpedo are just as terrifying as before.

In a nutshell

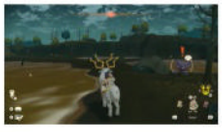
The closest *Pokémon* has come to matching its animated adaptations and a great move into fully real-time gameplay, but Lumiose City lacks something as a setting.

>> **Score 82%**

WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD
POKÉMON LEAF GREEN

▼ SOMETHING NEW
POKÉMON LEGENDS: ARCEUS



BRIEF HISTORY

» *Pokémon Legends: Arceus* established a new sub-branch of the hit monster-collecting franchise in 2022, beginning a move away from traditional Japanese RPG conventions. *Pokémon Legends: Z-A* is the second game in the line, and returns to the setting of *Pokémon X* and *Y*, the first 3DS games in the series which released in 2013. Unlike the previous *Legends* game, *Z-A* is set in the present day rather than exploring the region's history.

GO DEEPER

The facts behind Pokémon Legends: Z-A

» Lumiose City is directly inspired by the French capital city, Paris – many residents sprinkle bits of French into their dialogue.

» 230 Pokémon are available to collect in the base version of the game, not counting temporary Mega Evolutions.

» The first story DLC, *Mega Dimension*, has already been announced for release, and costs £24.99

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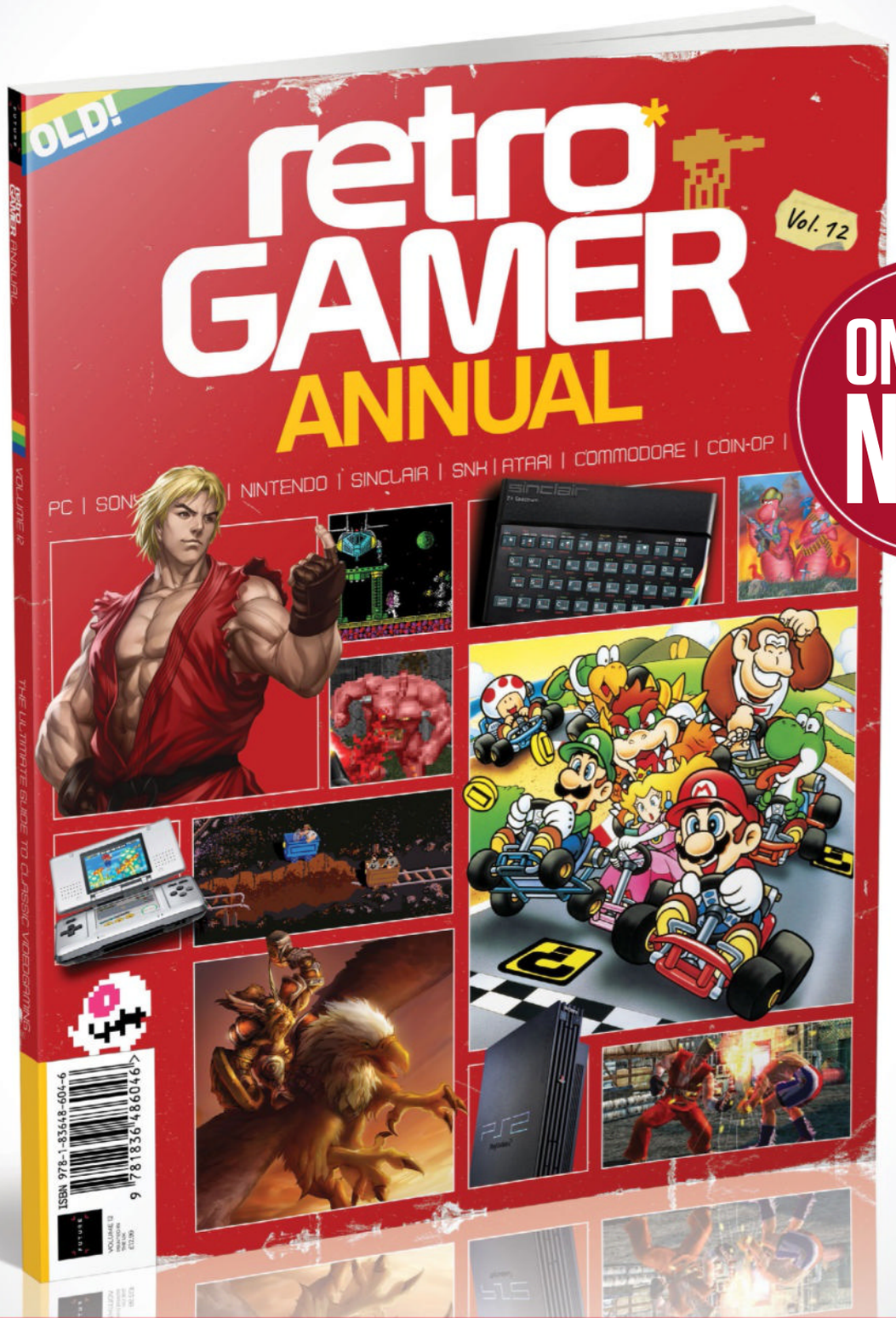
Our latest tome features an incredible amount of fantastic content from Retro Gamer's past 12 months. Iconic characters, huge franchises and classic systems all feature, making it an essential read for retro fans. Don't miss it!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PICK OF THE MONTH

Mortal Kombat: Legacy Kollection

» **System:** PC (version tested), PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series S/X, Switch, Switch 2
» **Buy it for:** £26.99 » **Buy it from:** Online, retail (PS5 and Switch only)

Digital Eclipse is back with its latest kompilation, and this time the subject is one of the biggest fighting game franchises of all time. You get all of the major *Mortal Kombat* arcade releases and a variety of home conversions of those games, plus PlayStation versions of *Mortal Kombat Trilogy* and spin-offs *Mortal Kombat Mythologies: Sub Zero* and *Mortal Kombat: Special Forces*, and Game Boy Advance versions of *Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance*. There are some impressive inclusions here – the WaveNet version of *Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3* has been something fans have sought-after for years, and we can't remember seeing a 32X game in a compilation before. Every game has toggles for cheats and assistance features like infinite Fatality time, as well as online multiplayer.

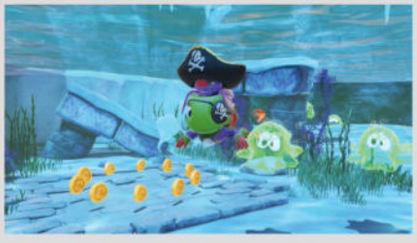
Of course, the big draw for any Digital Eclipse project tends to be the documentary side of things, presented via the now familiar interactive timeline. Like the game selection, the focus here is on the early years of the series so events after 2000 are covered in very limited detail, but what's here is an absolute delight. There's plenty of video interview content with Ed Boon, John Tobias and other major figures, behind-the-scenes footage and more.

We do have some quibbles, though they're relatively minor. If you haven't played the games in a while, you may find yourself shocked by the merciless difficulty of the CPU fighters, and it's fair to say that the spin-offs are pretty rubbish. Beyond that, the list of games isn't quite as comprehensive as it could be – it would have been nice to compare *Mortal Kombat 4*'s arcade, N64 and PlayStation releases, for example. But within the bounds of reason, it's hard to imagine a better celebration of the series.

» Score **90%**

» [PC] The games included are represented very well, with plenty of helpful extras to enjoy.

» [PC] The array of interviewees is impressive, and there are some very funny anecdotes included.



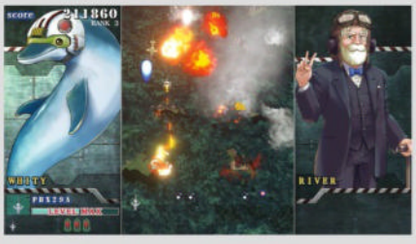
Yooka-Replaylee

» **System:** PC (tested), PS5, Switch, Xbox Series S/X
» **Buy it for:** £24.49 » **Buy it from:** Online, retail

PlayTonic's update of *Yooka-Laylee* is a huge improvement over the original game. In addition to enhancing it visually and audibly, it's been mechanically changed in numerous ways, all of which are for the better. The pair's abilities are now available from the game's start, it's far easier to navigate the game world thanks to a redesigned map, while numerous challenges have been updated, along with the 3D camera. It can still be a little frustrating tracking down missing Quills and some of the challenges feel a little too simple for their own good, but when it comes to capturing the magic of old-school 3D platformers, this is one of the best modern examples around.

DARRAN JONES

» Score **83%**



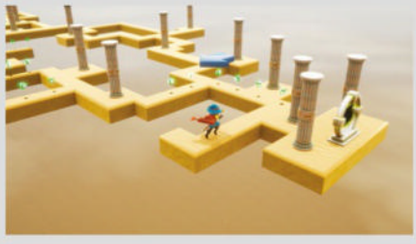
Sonic Wings Reunion

» **System:** Switch (version tested), PS4, PS5, PC
» **Buy it for:** £29.99+ » **Buy it from:** Online, retail (PS5 and Switch only)

It's been a long time since we've seen the *Sonic Wings* series, but unfortunately this reunion isn't one you'll love attending. The shoot-'em-up action is generally competent and not overly difficult, the fun characters return and the music has been put together by a talented crew. So it's a real shame that the game is beset by a variety of visual issues, which go beyond the evident blandness of the graphics. Bullets are usually clearly visible, but it's not always particularly easy to tell where the enemies firing them are, and the Switch struggles to keep up as the action intensifies later in the game, dropping frames with alarming regularity.

NICK THORPE

» Score **58%**



Lumo 2

» **System:** PC (tested), PS5, Switch, Xbox Series S/X
» **Buy it for:** £19.99+ » **Buy it from:** Online, retail

We were huge fans of the original *Lumo*, so it's disappointing that Gareth Noyce's sequel can't quite match it. It's a much more ambitious game this time around, with its homages extending to numerous classic games, from *Uridium* and *Impossible Mission* to *Space Harrier* and *Ant Attack*. Sadly it's hampered by the same sluggish and finicky controls as the original game and its isometric viewpoint also makes many of its jumps painfully tricky. It's nice to see new abilities opening up new areas of other levels and the music is superb in places, but *Lumo 2* feels far too ambitious for its own good. As a love letter to 8-bit games it's rather lovely, but playing those tributes often feels like an exercise in frustration.

DARRAN JONES

» Score **66%**

YOUR GAME IS NOT OVER

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[Y]/[Y]

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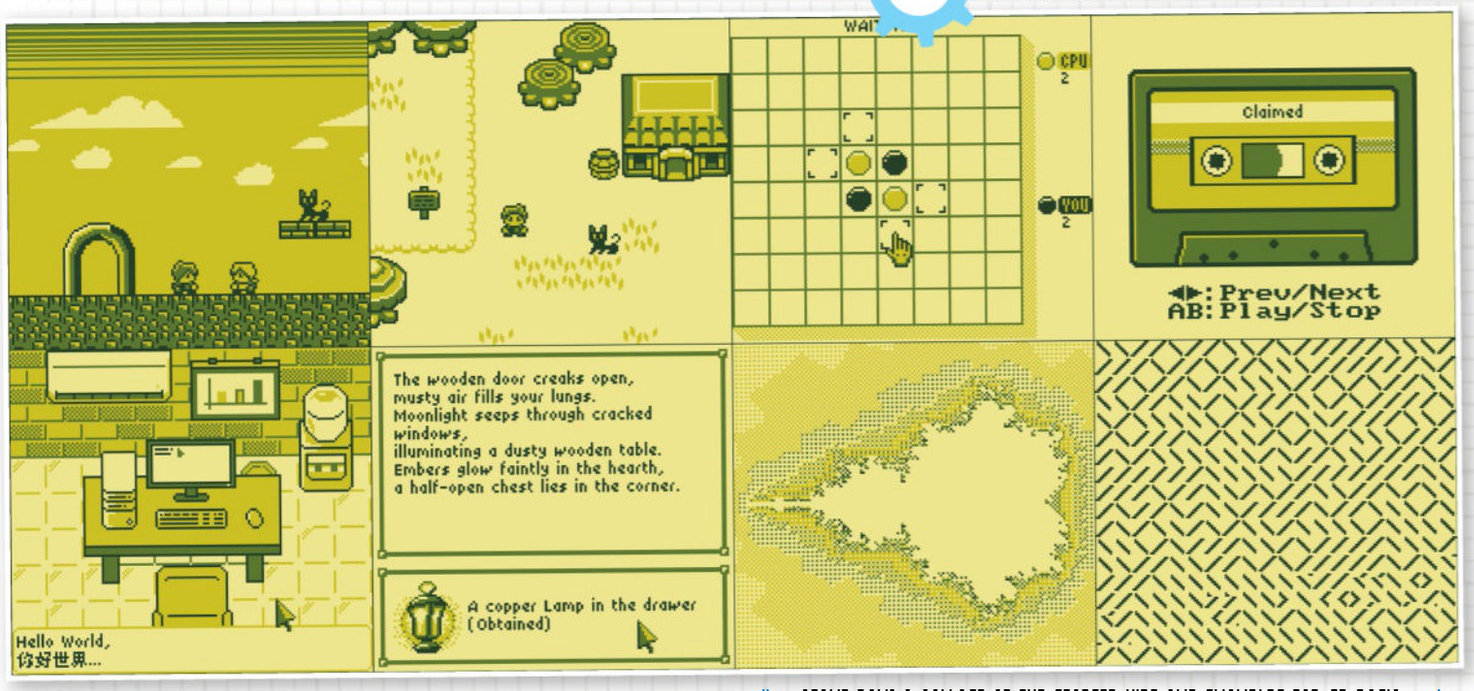
THE HOMEBREWER'S KIT

<YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO EVERYTHING HAPPENING IN THE HOMEBREW SCENE/>



<!--- [GAME BOY] A COLLAGE OF THE STARTER KITS AND EXAMPLES FOR GB BASIC. --->

<INTRO> THE HOMEBREW SCENE CERTAINLY SHOWS NO SIGNS OF SLOWING DOWN. OUR MAIN FEATURE LOOKS AT A NEW WAY OF CREATING GAME BOY TITLES, THE CHAMPION CODER IS ATTEMPTING AN AMBITIOUS ATARI CONVERSION, AND WE LOOK AT AN AMSTRAD CPC REMAKE. WITH PLENTY OF NEWS AND THE USUAL REVIEWS, IT'S ANOTHER PACKED COLUMN. AND NEXT TIME WE'LL BE LOOKING FORWARD TO THE GREAT GAMES YOU WILL ALL BE PLAYING IN 2026... </INTRO>

<!--- [GAME BUILDER BASIC'S CREATOR, TONY WANG. --->

<MAIN HEADER>

BACK TO BASICS

<INTRO> TONY WANG HAS CREATED GAMEBUILDER BASIC, AVAILABLE VIA BIT.LY/GB-BASIC, DESIGNED FOR WANNABE GAME BOY PROGRAMMERS TO MAKE THEIR OWN GAMES </INTRO>

<BODY> **Software developer Tony is a longtime fan of Nintendo's Game Boy.** "As a player, I have deep nostalgic ties to it," we're told. "As a developer, it's my favourite platform to work with. This inspired me to develop GameBuilder BASIC (GB BASIC), hoping it would help others discover the joy of creating and playing Game Boy games."

Tony describes GB BASIC as a fantasy console. "In addition to running on GB/GBC-compatible hardware, it extends functionality beyond original hardware, such as support for mice, touch-screens, keyboards and other mechanisms that allow game ROMs to 'communicate'. BASIC is simple to learn and has empowered many bedroom programmers to write code. From a technical perspective, GB BASIC uses a virtual machine to execute Game Boy game functions."

It has taken three years from the first piece of code to the full release, and Tony explains more of the process to us. "I primarily used C/C++ for efficiency. The application is built on common graphics and UI libraries. The compiler was handcrafted from scratch in C++. The runtime component is based on GBVM, written mostly in C with some assembly. The process was quite challenging. One of the biggest hurdles was ensuring the BASIC VM ran smoothly under the Game Boy's strict performance limits. The graphical editor required implementing import, export, editing, and asset pipeline functionalities to correctly package resources into ROMs."

Tony is allowing developers to make commercial ROMs and physical carts with GB Basic, telling us, "Developers retain full copyright over their works and resulting ROMs. GB BASIC does not impose additional terms or charges. Developers are free to distribute their ROMs in any form they choose." Tony also created useful resources to help beginners. "In addition

SPEAKING YOUR LANGUAGE

GBSTUDIO

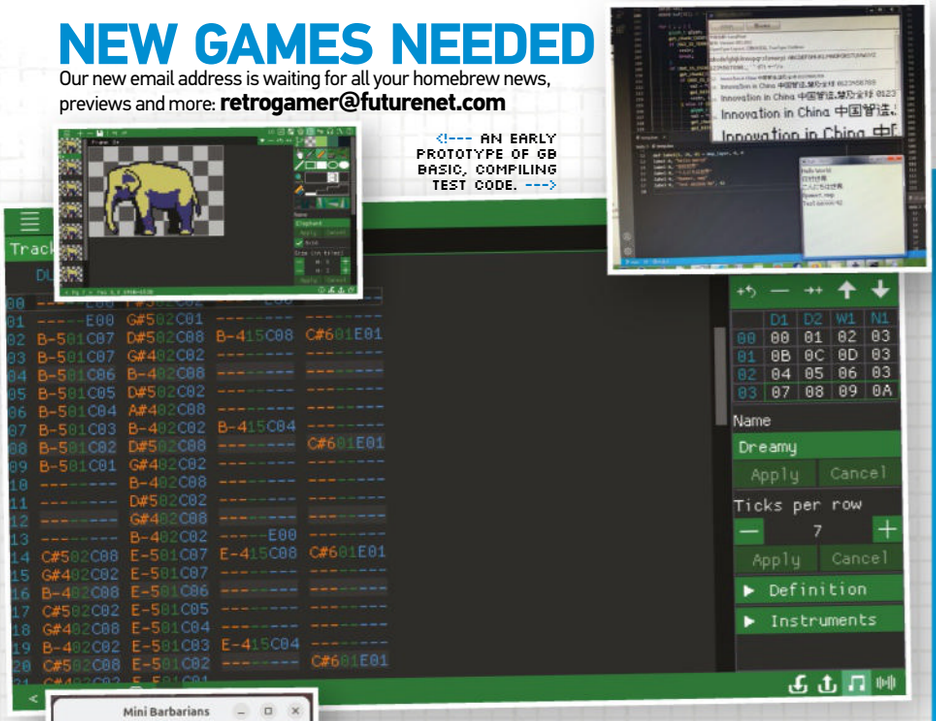
<With a great community at gbstudio.dev, the drag-and-drop environment made developing games like *Taskmaster* (**RG** 249) easier. />

GBDK 2020

<Following Larold's tutorials at bit.ly/gbdk-tutorials will help you understand this C-based development kit, used for the Luigi's Mansion demake. />

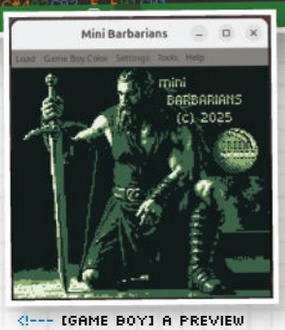
NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

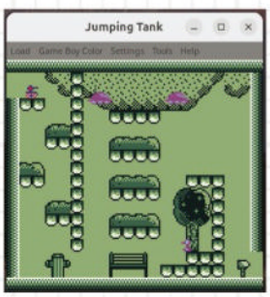


<!--- AN EARLY PROTOTYPE OF GB BASIC, COMPILING TEST CODE. --->

<!--- [PC] A LOOK AT THE BUILT-IN MUSIC TRACKER.. --->



<!--- [GAME BOY] A PREVIEW OF THE TITLE SCREEN FOR MINI BARBARIANS, DEVELOPED WITH GB BASIC. --->



<!--- [GAME BOY] JUMPING TANK IS CURRENTLY IN DEVELOPMENT WITH GB BASIC. --->

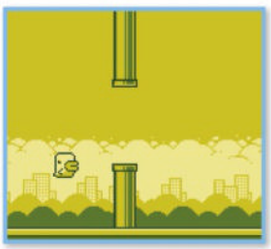
to documentation, I've included a set of examples and several starter kits. The examples demonstrate specific features; the starter kits are more complete game projects, serving as templates. I plan to include more examples and expand the starter kits to cover more genres, and to support custom kernels. Editor improvements will include more intuitive tools and a user-friendly debugger to simplify troubleshooting. I also intend to add Super Game Boy support at runtime. Another high priority is developing web-based interactive tutorials, allowing beginners to try out what they learn directly in a browser."

So what new games are on the way? "I'm aware of several projects," Tony tells us. "One developer is working on a tank-themed platformer and a barbarian-themed game." Has he tried other methods of making Game Boy games (see SPEAKING YOUR LANGUAGE) himself? "I've tried GB Studio, which is incredibly user-friendly and supported by a vibrant community. Personally, I prefer coding, so I recommend GBDK-2020, a C compiler environment that also supports inline assembly. It's geared toward advanced users." If you are interested in making your own Game Boy titles, there's a curated list of resources at gbdev.io/resources and GB BASIC is at bit.ly/gb-basic </BODY>

<INTRO> FIVE OTHER WAYS TO MAKE YOUR OWN GAME BOY GAME </INTRO>

ZGB

<The platform game Powa was created in this environment based on GBDK 2020, which allows C or assembly code. bit.ly/zgb-github />



RGBDS

<The Rednex Game Boy Development System is for assembly programmers; read Bitnefer's tutorial on Flappy Boy. bit.ly/flappyboy-tutorial />

WLA DX

<For advanced assembly, this multi-platform tool was used for Void Stranger (a *Sokoban*-inspired puzzler) in GB Compo 2025. bit.ly/wladx-github />

<!--- [PC] BLASTING A PURPLE ALIEN IN PLATYPUS RECLAYED. --->

NEWS BYTES

<INTRO> ALL THE LATEST NEWS, HANDILY ARRANGED BY FORMAT </INTRO>

<**Amiga:** The Scorpion Engine wiki for developers is now available at bit.ly/scorpion-wiki />

<**Atari/Intellivision:** AtariAge added 15 new titles to its web shop, including *Akalabeth* for the Intellivision. Grab them from bit.ly/new_atariage />

<**C64:** *Bubble Bobble Remastered* features improved graphics and a new title tune. Bounce on over to bit.ly/bbr-c64 />

<**Enterprise 128:** The latest games from KTB Retro Computing (see **RG** 278, also on ZX Spectrum) are *Maisie Day Is Not OK* and *Little John Can't Jump*. Name your price and visit bit.ly/ktb-enterprise />

<**Game Boy Color:** *Infinity* is a massive RPG, originally developed from 1999-2001 by Affinix Software, and now available to preorder from Incube8. Find it at infinitygbc.com />

<**MSX:** MSXdev 2025 is underway, with the deadline of 15 March 2026 and more than ten entries already confirmed. There's more info at msxdev.org/msxdev25 />

<**Plus/4:** The brilliant *Death Sector* by Csabo mixes *Cybernoid*-style movement with puzzles to solve. Get blasting at bit.ly/deathsector />

<**Vectrex:** *Major Tom* by Scott Huggins and *Gyrostonomy/Gyrostology* by Peer Johannsen (with a unique rotatable overlay) are both available from vectrexmulti.com />

<**ZX Spectrum:** RetroSouls released their latest, *Zak McDrucken Saves The Chickens*. Get clucking at bit.ly/chickens-zx
The Midnight Brew 2025 Collection (including *Gorf*, *Frogger RX*, *Space Invaders*, *Lock 'N Chase* and *Wycheweald/Hafoc Tor*) is available at bit.ly/brew2025-zx />

<**Various:** Volcano Bytes released *Trasmoz Legends* (follow-up to *Curse Of Trasmoz* and *Revenge Of Trasmoz*) for Steam, Xbox Series, Switch, and PS4/5 (bit.ly/trasmoz-legends) *Platypus Reclayed*, a shoot-'em-up featuring clay models and C64 remixes, launched for modern platforms. Find it at claymatic.games/platypus-reclayed />

CHAMPION CODER
VEGA

<INTRO> TAKING HIS PSEUDONYM FROM CAPCOM'S ICONIC FIGHTER, VEGA'S STREET FIGHTER II CONVERSION IS PROGRESSING RAPIDLY </INTRO>

<INFO FROM: GDYNIA, POLAND WEBSITE: VEGA.ATARI.PL FORMAT: ATARI XE/XL
PREVIOUS GAMES: BUBBLE BOBBLE, MIKIE, CYBORG WARRIORS, BOMB JACK
WORKING ON: STREET FIGHTER II (XE/XL) />

WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO PORT STREET FIGHTER II TO THE ATARI, VEGA?

<I had seen the Game Boy version once, and I was sure the same version was possible on the Atari. It might even be better because we can add more colours. I started writing the drawing routines, and it turned out not as slow as I thought. Even when the 4KHz samples were added, the game didn't slow down. It was surprising and encouraging, so I continued. />

<!--- [ATARI XE/XL] RYU STANDS PROUDLY ON THE CREDITS SCREEN, WITH THE GRAPHICS BY VEGA, SIM, AND GASPAR. --->

WHAT PROGRAMMING TOOLS DO YOU USE?

<The basic assembly programming tool is MADS, and the graphics are done in Graph2Font (both by TEBE). We also use a PC graphics program, GIMP. For the music, Miker used the Raster Music Tracker (author: Raster/C.P.U). Many times I wrote to him that I needed music, and the same day, the music was ready. For the first time, I used 4KHz samples instead of sound effects generated by RMT; we have sounds similar to the Amiga/Atari ST versions. />

DID YOU JUST CONVERT THE GRAPHICS STRAIGHT FROM THE GAME BOY VERSION?

<The sprites were already finished, so we only had to convert them, with maybe a few changes. The backgrounds were rather weak [once converted], so more colours and details were added. />

HOW MANY FIGHTERS ARE IN THE GAME?

<The same as the Game Boy version, meaning we have nine fighters. Each of them has two or three special moves. Moreover, these special moves can take twice as much energy. />

WILL A PHYSICAL VERSION BE AVAILABLE?

<The game requires a 4MB MEGACART cartridge. Unfortunately, the 4MB memory chips used by this cartridge are no longer available. So a new 4MB cartridge, which uses 2x2MB of memory, is currently being developed. It may take some time yet. />

ARE YOU WORRIED THAT CAPCOM WOULD PREVENT YOU FROM PUBLISHING THE GAME?

<I hope not; this is a hobby and not a commercial project. />

<!--- [ATARI XE/XL] WITH THE MOST FAMOUS THIGHS IN FIGHTING GAMES, CHUN LI UNLEASHES HER ICONIC LIGHTNING KICK. --->

<!--- [ATARI XE/XL] SONIC BOOM! FIGHTING AT AN AIR BASE INSTEAD OF IN A STREET, GUILE IS BEATING RYU. --->

<!--- [ATARI XE/XL] TIGER UPPERCUT! SAGAT HAS SHOWN BALROG THE ERROR OF HIS WAYS.. --->

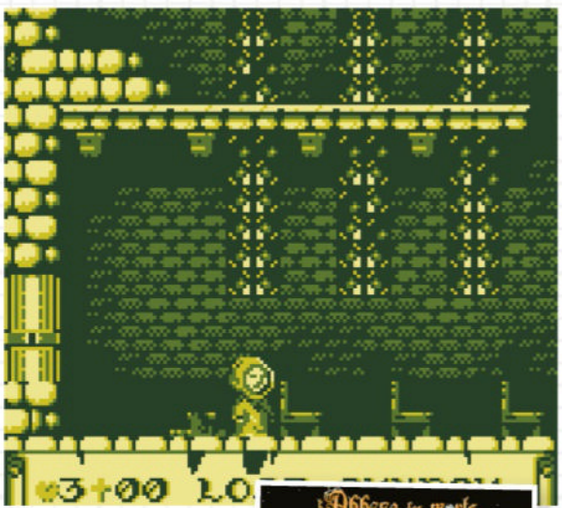
DATA BURST
L'ABBAYE DES MORTS

<INFO BY: FORMAT: GAME BOY/GAME BOY COLOR/SUPER GAME BOY CREDITS: ALEKMAUL STUDIO PRICE: 39.99 EUROS (PHYSICAL EDITION PREORDER) WEB: BIT.LY/ABBAYE-GAMEBOY />

<BODY> **Locomalito's original PC game was inspired by Spectrum graphics and has had multiple conversions over the years.** Now the French Alekmaul team brings it to Nintendo's handheld. The background is the persecution of the religious group, the Cathars, in 13th century France. Driven out of Languedoc, Cathar Jean Raymond is pursued by Crusaders at the start of the game and takes refuge in the ruined abbey of the title. Here, he discovers that the 12 brothers have disappeared, and he must recover 12 crosses to reveal the secret of why they have gone. There is something dark lurking deep in the ruins…

Jean can jump and crawl around the scrolling sections, finding hearts for extra lives. Enemies kill on contact, with Jean respawning at the nearest icon he touched, while picking up scrolls reveals more of the plot. To find the route forward, the player must be clever, flicking switches or maybe ringing a bell, while teleporters will also move Jean between sections. The graphics have been recreated well, and Adan Toledo has done a great job with the soundtrack. The one drawback is that the smaller screen size means you occasionally have to take a leap of faith, unable to see enemies above or below you. This is a minor issue in an otherwise well-polished conversion, offering something different for Game Boy fans. </BODY>

SCORE: 83%



<!--- [GAME BOY] THE GAME IS COMPATIBLE WITH THE ORIGINAL DMG GAME BOY, RENDERING GRAPHICS IN GREYSCALE. --->

<!--- [GAME BOY COLOR] RUNNING ON A SUPER GAME BOY ADDS A BORDER TO THE GAME'S DISPLAY. --->

NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

THE HOMEBREWER'S KIT

<!--- [ZX SPECTRUM] THIS SCREEN DRAWS ITS INSPIRATION FROM BUBBLE BOBBLE AND DOES INDEED LOOK FAMILIAR. --->

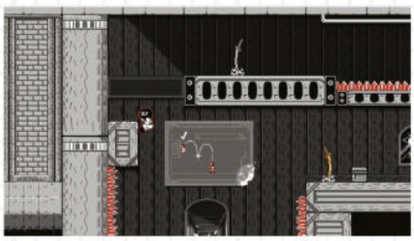
<!--- [ZX SPECTRUM] THE NOW-TRADITIONAL SCREEN NAMES INCLUDE GREAT PUNS, SUCH AS THEY MIGHT BE GIANTS CAUSEWAY. --->

BUBBLEBACK – THE STORY OF FORWARD TO THE PAST 2

<INFO FORMAT: ZX SPECTRUM CREDITS: SLOANYSOFT PRICE: FREE WEB: BIT.LY/BUBBLEBACK-ZX />

<BODY> **We're big fans of Davey and Nate's MPAGD games, especially *Jet Set Steamboat Willie*.** In this sequel to an earlier game, Nate is transformed into a bubble-blowing dragon by the Baron. The 34 screens (including a hidden screen) are inspired by *Bubble Bobble*, *Arkanoid* and even *Break Space* magazine. Nate must collect 86 yellow bubbles, blowing his own bubbles at certain enemies that can then be popped. Nate can also jump on bubbles to reach higher platforms. With multiple exits from most screens, you can explore in different ways. The cute and colourful graphics are accompanied by a brilliant soundtrack from Lee Bee, including covers of the *Back To The Future* theme and *Bubble Bobble*. It makes for another fantastic Sloanysoft release. </BODY>

SCORE: 86%



<!--- [DREAMCAST] THE FIRST SECTION ACTS AS A TUTORIAL, TEACHING YOU THE BASIC MOVES. --->

<!--- [DREAMCAST] ENEMIES ARE DISPATCHED IN A SHOWER OF BLOOD, AND YOU MEET A SIMILARLY GORY FATE. --->

MUTE CRIMSON DC

<INFO FORMAT: DREAMCAST CREDITS: ICED LIZARD TEAM PRICE: FREE WEB: BIT.LY/MUTECRIMSON-DC />

<BODY> **Based on the 2024 Steam DX release, an evil force is invading, and only a solitary ninja can stop it.** In this precision platformer inspired by *Super Meat Boy* and *Celeste*, you must double-jump to avoid flames and lava, while sword-slashing your way through enemies. At the end of each of the nine levels, a large boss awaits. Easy Mode gives extra checkpoints to respawn from, and collecting coins will unlock extra features. The stylish graphics, well-drawn cutscenes and the great chiptune soundtrack help sell this challenging but fun free title. </BODY>

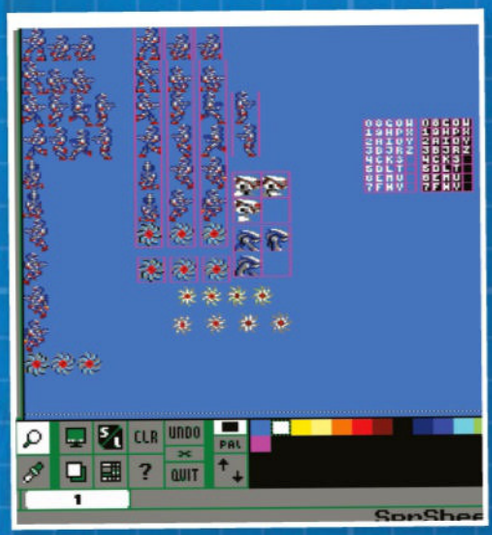
SCORE: 87%

PROCESSING

<INTRO> BEN YORIS (ONEVISION) TALKS ABOUT THE REMASTERED TURRICAN 128K FOR THE AMSTRAD CPC </INTRO>

<BODY> **Ben credits this remastered *Turrican* to JMB, "He likes to have a look at some oldies game code and see what can be accomplished to optimise or speed up critical routines."** JMB finds the graphics in the code, and Ben uses Grafx2 to enhance or redraw them. "If a sprite has a given size, you can't go over it; you have to redraw the sprites in the same matrix and palette. Sometimes it's frustrating because you'd want to do more. You also have to respect the number of frames for a given animation."

Fitting this enhanced version of *Turrican* into a disk image was tricky. "We updated the loading screen, main menu, Turrican himself (I wanted to have a sprite far closer to the Amiga version) and the HUD. I started to redraw the walker enemy from early levels, but for technical reasons, it was not possible to replace it. JMB had a hard time including all the additional music, 128K is easily and quickly filled!" The forum thread at bit.ly/turrican128-cpc has the latest download of the game. </BODY>



<!--- [PC] EDITING THE FAMILIAR SPRITES IN GRAFX2. --->

HOT TOPIC

RETROBATES MULL OVER THE SCENE'S MOST INTRIGUING ISSUES

X MARKS THE SPOT

The team look back at Microsoft's Xbox 360

DARRAN JONES

NICK THORPE

TIM EMPEY

With the Xbox 360 celebrating its 20th anniversary, the time felt right to personally reminisce about Microsoft's second (and arguably most successful) console.

DARRAN

So what's your first memory of the Xbox 360?

TIM

It must have been back in Highbury when the Xbox mags were starting to include 360 coverage, and of course *X360* magazine was being set up.

NICK

Clips of that MTV reveal special, I think. Unless you mean in person – in that case, it was seeing a demo pod in Game. It was running *Call Of Duty 2*, and the manager told me I wasn't allowed to wait around to play it and had to leave the shop. Never mind that the kid playing the game wasn't old enough to legally buy it, eh?

DARRAN

That was an exciting time at Highbury. I wrote a book about Rare for *X360* with Ryan King. I actually left *games™* to join **Retro Gamer** just before the console came out. Did anyone get one at launch?

NICK

No, I actually got a Wii first when that came out in 2006, then got the 360 the following year.

TIM

Nope, I didn't get one until 2009. I'm pretty sure the first game I played on it was the *Wolverine* game.

DARRAN

I picked mine up on launch day with *Call Of Duty 2*, *Project Gotham Racing 3*, *Perfect Dark Zero* and *Kameo: Elements Of Power*. *360*, Imagine's mag, didn't get any free consoles, so I ended up getting all the early promos that came in. I think we started reviewing Xbox Live Arcade games shortly after.

NICK

Yeah, it was issue 21, and there was a big *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved* interview too. Honestly, as much as the packaged games were exciting, I think that one was the launch game that excited me most. Xbox Live Arcade was a haven for things like twin-stick shooters that just weren't viable as retail releases, and that alone was a big draw for me.

DARRAN

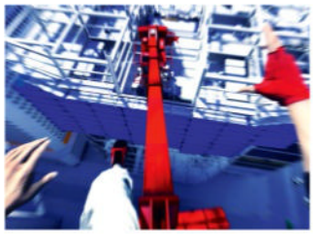
Xbox Live Arcade was so good, from arcade classics like *Robotron: 2084* and *Double Dragon* to the likes of *Sensible World Of Soccer* and *Symphony Of The Night*. What did everyone think about Achievements?

TIM

Well I've got 292,656 these days, so I quite like them. I don't hunt for them anymore, not like I used to anyway.

NICK

Honestly, they were kind of spoiled for me by living in a shared house. I got 450 points on *Gears Of War* before I ever touched it, because someone went through it on my profile rather than their own.


» [Xbox 360] *Mirror's Edge* is a game that greatly benefits from being run on a modern Xbox. It's a delight at 60fps on Xbox Series X.

DARRAN

That's rubbish, Nick. I remember being in a competition with Ryan and we were buying any old crap to get easy Achievements. I got told off by Game because I'd exchanged a game three times in a week because I kept completing them and swapping them for something new. Nick mentioned *Gears Of War*, so what games wowed everyone on the system?

TIM

I really liked *Dead Rising* when it came out – so many zombies! (I played it on Ryan's machine when he was away on a press trip.) I can't stand it now because I played it so much. *Bayonetta* was another great one and the first game I got all the Achievements for. I bought it again, the updated version, but I'm not as good at it as I was.

» [Xbox 360] Games like *Red Dead Redemption* were supported by great multiplayer options and strong DLC.

» [Xbox 360] *BioShock* is one of the few FPS games Nick can still play without feeling sick.

» [Xbox 360] *Kameo: Elements Of Power* was why Darran bought an Xbox 360 on launch day.

» [Xbox 360] Games like *Open Season* weren't good, but were a good way of farming easy Achievements.

NICK

BioShock was incredible, it was so atmospheric and technically phenomenal for the time. Funny you should mention *Bayonetta*, as *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* was one of the last big hitters for me and that was by Platinum too.

DARRAN

Kameo: Elements Of Power was the main reason I grabbed a console on launch day. As time went on *Red Dead Redemption* became the benchmark game for me. Surely there's some *GTA* fans here?

TIM

I didn't play *Kameo: Elements Of Power* until I got the *Rare Replay* compilation. I'm not a fan of *GTA* to be honest, and didn't get on with *Red Dead* either.

NICK

One of my housemates got *GTA IV* and we even had a Statue Of Happiness on top of the living room TV, but for whatever reason I never really played it. I did really enjoy *GTA V*, but didn't get it myself until the PS4 version came out.

DARRAN

Was anyone else upset when they swapped the Blades system for the new dashboard? How did you feel about the Avatars? (I bought a lot of digital *Star Wars* clothes for mine).

» [Xbox 360] *Gears Of War* was a huge deal on the Xbox 360, gaining great acclaim and sales.

> "I got a Deathstroke costume from one of the Batman Arkham games for my avatar, I haven't changed it since"
>
> **TIM**

TIM

I got a Deathstroke costume from one of the *Batman Arkham* games for my avatar, I haven't changed it since. It's quite funny when it pops up again when I'm playing a 360 game. I didn't like the change to the dashboard, because who likes change?

NICK

I got used to the change pretty quickly. I always quite liked the Avatars, their animations were nice and they added a touch of personality to the system interface. Was that a controversial opinion? I honestly can't remember.

DARRAN

Some people definitely moaned at the time, but that's the internet for you.

» Darran wrote a lot of previews for Imagine's Xbox 360 magazines during his early days on **Retro Gamer**.

» [Xbox 360] *Dead Rising* was one of the first big games out of Japan and really showed off the Xbox 360's power.

READERS REACT

The Xbox 360 games that made you want the console

Nick Wilson
The PS3 got delayed in the UK and I saw the *Gears Of War Mad World* advert on TV over Christmas. Sold.

Lee Jackson
A mix of *Viva Piñata* and *Gears Of War*. Polar opposites in terms of tone, but both really felt next gen at the time, and a good showcase of the types of experiences available on the platform.

roidukebab
GTA IV. I was pretty hyped when the game came out, but then I saw a demo in a game shop. I bought a 360 Elite and the game. What awesome memories!

Kara Jane Adams
Project Gotham Racing 3. It even convinced me to pick up a 32-inch Samsung LCD TV at the same time. Thus rendering me penniless, but also incredibly happy as I sat staring in awe at those sumptuous HD visuals.

Extrazero
I got mine on day one. I was really excited to have two new Rare games; *Perfect Dark Zero* and *Kameo* (the latter of which I did enjoy) as well as *Call Of Duty 2* and *Quake 4*, as I didn't have a great PC at the time.

ThatsGooodJason
Still relatively fresh off Sega's exit from console manufacturing, I bought consoles based on which ones received *Sonic* games first. Guess which one that was?

Jellyfish
Gears Of War. It blew my mind when I saw it for the first time. I'm still playing it with friends on the original system.

Cure Oshiri
I'm going to be honest: *Dead Or Alive Xtreme 2* on the day of release. And I'm still not ashamed about it, of course.

VaultBoy
The original *Assassin's Creed*. My cousin got it for Christmas and I remember watching him play it and wanting it so badly. I got my first 360 on my birthday and got *Assassin's Creed* and *Rainbow Six: Vegas* as my first two games.

Garlador
Lost Odyssey. It remains one of my absolute favourite JRPGs.

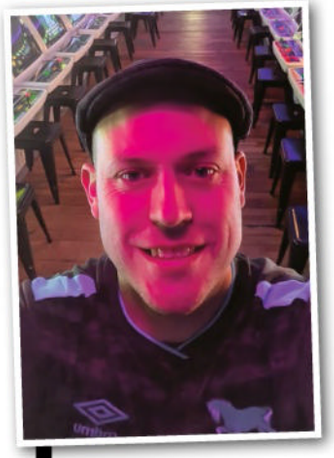
Kenar
Dead Rising. I can finally live out my *Dawn Of The Dead* fantasy with hundreds of zombies on the screen.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

READERS TAKE US THROUGH **THE RETRO KEYHOLE**

SNK COLLECTION 0
"I got this rare one on eBay years ago, it now sells for £150. A rare piece and a nice collection of early SNK games."
PAID: £20

PSP MAGAZINES
"I had a lot of these from the time, and others I've purchased on eBay. I don't think a lot of people realise the PSP had dedicated magazines, including an official one."
PAID: VARIOUS



BIO

NAME:
Jay Drury

LOCATION:
Suffolk

ESTIMATED VALUE OF COLLECTION:
£5K

FAVOURITE SYSTEM:
PSP

FAVOURITE GAME:
Double Dragon

FACEBOOK:
Forever Arcade

PORTABLE SONY PASSION

Forever Arcade's Jay Drury loves his handheld gaming, especially Sony's brilliant PSP

Words by Faith Johnson

Jay Drury has over 1,000 games and movies in his PSP collection, and he's currently going through them all from A to Z. However, Jay's gaming journey didn't start with his love of Sony's mighty handheld but much earlier. "My first gaming experience was playing a *Pong* clone called Binatone when I was about six years old," he begins. "I remember loving that you could control something to make it move on your TV screen. My dad then bought the ZX Spectrum 48K, and the rest is history."

Although these are cherished memories, it was another side of gaming that truly gripped Jay back then. "My real passion came from the arcades that were such special places back in the Eighties and Nineties. Just seeing the glow of the marquee and screens, it was an amazing time with so many different games and ways to play them. The arcades will always remind me of seaside holidays with the family."

Jay tells us that one game in particular stands out in his memories from the arcades he would visit with his father. "*Pole Position* is a very important game to me as it's one of my first gaming memories, and I was lucky to play the cockpit version. I remember struggling to reach the pedals, so I sat right on the edge or on my dad's lap. This was an amazing experience, and it's still one of my favourite arcade racers."

We then ask Jay how he got into collecting games. "I collect games due to the memories they have attached to them. If I play something like *Speedball 2*, I will always remember my mate and me playing it after school, and the fun we had." Jay continues this thought by explaining, "That's the main thing about retro gaming, it's the memories they bring back, and that's the main reason I started a group on Facebook called Forever Arcade so we can all share retro gaming memories."

Since his younger years, Jay has always loved handhelds. "I've always been a handheld gamer because I love the freedom it gives me, being able to play anywhere and anytime. It all started with LCD handhelds, especially *Donkey Kong* G&W. When I bought the original Game Boy with my paper round money, the love for handheld gaming stuck with me forevermore."

We ask Jay to explain why the PSP is so special to him. "The game library is so diverse, and it is my favourite of any system," he says. "I've been impressed with the PSP ever since I played *Ridge Racer*, and I knew then it was an impressive handheld, and it still is. The PSP covers every game genre, it has a fantastic selection of retro collections, especially arcade games, and has plenty of hidden gems, and let's not forget all the awesome movies you can collect."

We finish up by asking Jay if he could find one 'grail item' to add to his retro collection, what would it be? "For me, it would be an arcade cabinet. I'd love an original Atari *Star Wars* cockpit arcade machine. I recently played one again at the excellent Arcade Club in Bury, and it was just as magical as it was when I first played it in 1985."

Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com retrogamermag.bsky.social

NON-UK UMD MOVIES

"I collected these mostly from eBay and game shops. Europe had some brilliant film releases we never got in the UK. Here are three of my favourites."

PAID: VARIOUS

PSP PROMOTIONAL ITEMS

"I found these cards on eBay and have never seen them since. They're cards from GAME store promotions for the launch titles on the PSP."

PAID: VARIOUS

JEWEL IN THE CROWN

PIXEL ART PORTRAIT OF ME BY STOO CAMBRIDGE

■ "Stoo is a member of my Facebook group, Forever Arcade, and he does commissioned pixel art prints. I love his pixel art work, especially on *Sensible Soccer* and *Cannon Fodder*."

PAID: N/A

BARGAIN HUNT

Your guide to the rising world of retro prices

THE COVER STAR

XBOX 360

Used working consoles can be picked up for as little as **£30,** along with a selection of games. As you'd expect, boxed consoles are more expensive and can range in price from **£50** to **£100.** Limited-edition models can fetch even higher prices.

STORMBRINGER (ZX SPECTRUM)

Although quite hard to find complete, Mastertronic's classic title can be purchased for as little as **£5** if you're lucky.

PIPE MANIA (AMIGA)

Various versions of this classic puzzler exist, but none should cost over **£20.** Loose copies can be had for under **£5.**

SUPER MARIO BROS (NES)

Loose carts cost as little as **£7.50,** but mint copies can go for hundreds if not thousands, in some cases.

MEGA MAN X (SNES)

Japanese carts cost about **£15** (search for *Rock Man X*) but complete European copies will be over **£150.** Mint USA versions go for several hundred.

KURUSHI (PLAYSTATION)

A standard complete copy should set you back about **£20** with mint condition copies fetching upwards of **£60.**

THE TERMINATOR (MEGA-CD)

Your wallet will be terminated after shelling out over **£125** for a used copy or **£200** for a mint one.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE THIRD AGE (PLAYSTATION 2)

A good condition complete copy of this enjoyable RPG costs **£8,** with some poorer condition ones fetching well under **£5.** Sealed copies should cost about **£20.**

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY (SNES)

If you want to enjoy David Wise's cracking soundtrack you'll be looking to spend up to **£65** for a PAL copy. PAL cartridges start from **£15.**

SILENT HILL 4: THE ROOM (PC)

We've seen the scary survival horror game hit **£50** for a PC copy, and it's slowly rising in price (particularly on home consoles). Alternatively, GOG offers a digital version for **£7.19.**

HOW MUCH?!

LIMITED-EDITION XBOX

A factory-sealed limited-edition Xbox from the USA sold recently for over **£6,000.** It is special as it was only released during the holiday season of 2003.

Prices correct at time of print

» [Game Boy Advance] Static cutscenes help progress *Fire Emblem*'s story.

IN THE KNOW

- **» PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO
- **» DEVELOPER:** INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS
- **» PLATFORM:** GAME BOY ADVANCE
- **» RELEASE:** 2003
- **» PRICE TODAY:** £100+

FIRE EMBLEM

Despite first debuting on the Famicom in the early Nineties, it took another decade for Intelligent System's long-running series to appear in the West. This might explain why that first release now fetches a princely sum

Words by Darran Jones

» Unless you can check it, we'd steer clear of grabbing a cheap cartridge as it's most likely fake.

THE GAME

While *Fire Emblem* is a series that's now well known in the West, that wasn't always the case. The series first debuted on the Famicom in 1990, building on the mechanics that Intelligent Systems had first introduced with its *Advance Wars* series, but adding a Westernised fantasy setting and permadeath amongst other changes. Despite proving popular enough to spawn several sequels, the series never made it outside of Japan – that is until the release of *Fire Emblem*, which made its European debut in 1994, a full 14 months after its original Japanese release.

Fire Emblem: The Blazing Blade (as it's now canonically known) is actually the second game in the series to appear on the Game Boy Advance (the first being *Fire Emblem: The Binding Blade*) and it serves as a prequel to that earlier title. Set 20 years before that game's events, it sees you following the trials and tribulations of three protagonists with you taking on the role of a tactician who offers them advice and helps plan out battles. As Lyn, Eliwood and Hector pursue their story-driven adventures, you'll meet all manner of interesting characters, many of whom you can recruit, as you try to uncover the problems plaguing the continent of Elibe. With its endearing characters, an enjoyable (it rather conventional) plot and some epic, turn-based battles, *Fire Emblem* is the perfect portable game and we're not surprised to see it rising in price.

THE QUALITY

Being the seventh instalment in a long-running series means that *Fire Emblem* has a layer of polish that would have impressed anyone who was experiencing it for the first time back in the early Noughties. Like *Advance Wars*, the main drive of the game is grand strategic battles on gridded maps, with the player being able to control a number of units who all have distinct abilities, from courageous Cavaliers and spell-flinging Mages, to pious Priests and treasure-seeking Thieves.

Combat continues to revolve around the series' Weapon Triangle system, so axes are strong against lances, lances defeat swords and swords will always best axes. Bows, on the other hand, are incredibly

» [Game Boy Advance] No matter how strong you are, you can still flub attacks.

strong against flying units. Other considerations are that weapons can come in various strengths, characters can change classes once reaching level 10 and there's a support system in place as well, which can boost stats when certain characters interact with each other outside of battles.

WHY IT'S EXPENSIVE

Despite being an unproven series in the West, an interview on nindori.com with Hitoshi Yamagami suggests *Fire Emblem* sold well enough for Nintendo to consider a follow-up GameCube game. We'd imagine that interest in the newer games in the series has been one of the main driving factors of *Fire Emblem*'s current price (we've seen a similar thing happen with the *Yakuza* series). When Game first went into administration in 2012 it was possible to buy both *Fire Emblem* and its sequel *The Sacred Stones* brand-new for £5 (our copy of *The Sacred Stones* remains sealed), meaning the second-hand market was affected quite badly at the time. Nowadays, a better awareness of the series, the general degradation of cardboard boxes and a slew of pirated cartridges all mean that you'll be lucky to find the game in complete condition for under £100.

CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES

You're unlikely to hear the words 'cheap' and 'old *Fire Emblem* games' in a sentence anytime soon, and as Nintendo has never revisited the game, its price has remained high. In fact, the only way you can legally enjoy the game today is by playing it via Nintendo's Switch Online Service. So what are you to do in the meantime if you want some 2D, turn-based action? Thankfully, there are some decent alternatives out there. If you don't mind its militaristic setting, both *Advance Wars* and its sequel can both be found on the GBA for under £50 complete. In terms of modern games, we'd argue that *Wargroove* and its sequel are the closest you can get to a traditional *Fire Emblem* experience today. Both titles are available on modern systems and physical copies are reasonably priced

» [Game Boy Advance] *Fire Emblem*'s story isn't particularly deep but it does cover themes like loss and discrimination.

» [Game Boy Advance] Healers can't fight, so protect them at all costs.

THE BOTTOM LINE

While we'll admit that £100 is a lot of money for a single game, we can make a good argument for *Fire Emblem*. There's not only a lot of enjoyable adventuring for your money (around 30 hours worth on your first playthrough), but we've seen nothing to suggest that the game won't continue to rise in price as the series continues to gain popularity. That said, if it is too much to justify, subscribe to Nintendo's Switch Online Service and enjoy it there.

I'VE GOT IT!

The readers who went on an epic quest

David Kingsnorth
I bought it at launch. I have a US copy so I must have imported it from Video Games Plus or NTSX as it was released in the US before the UK got it I guess? I suppose I would have paid the going rate those days for a new GBA game, so about £25-£30.

Adam Sadler
I sure do. I bought this on the release date from the independent game store I worked in at the time – Thatz Entertainment in Lakeside, Essex. I probably paid £34.99.

Lee Jackson
I got it for free. A friend lives abroad nowadays so they generously gave me their GBA and GameCube collection as they didn't want to take it with them.

Ken Harrison
I bought a sealed copy from Game for £10 in a sale. I never opened it and sold it on eBay for £100 about ten years ago.

Luke The Fox VA
The Blazing Blade with Lyn? I think I picked it up at London Comic Con around 2014. It was just the cartridge. I can't remember the exact price but I think it was cheap.

SpongicX
Own it, no, but I played the Nintendo Switch Online Version. I made it to chapter 9 I think. I couldn't beat it, and I wasn't in the mood of starting all over.

Another World
I purchased it from Kay B Toy store for $6.66.

Dario Barrera
I bought it from GameStop. I paid $29.99 plus 10% off for being an employee.

A GENERATION REDEFINED

How upgrading to high definition has heightened Nick's Xbox 360 love

The Xbox 360, the console that ushered in the HD revolution, launched without HDMI support. That's funny when you take a moment to think about it, but I tend to think of that whole era as more of a transitional period. Never mind the fact that games like *Halo 3* and *Call Of Duty 4* couldn't quite hit 720p, most players I knew simply wouldn't have noticed – like me, they were playing Microsoft's most popular console on the same display technology they had relied on for years. Many of you were probably in the same boat, if contemporary complaints about the readability of text in *Dead Rising* are anything to go by.

I was a student back when I got my Xbox 360, so my setup wasn't exactly swish – I used the bundled composite cables to connect my powerful new console to the cheapest 14-inch portable TV Asda sold. Quite a few games displayed in letterboxed widescreen on 4:3 displays, making the already suboptimal situation even worse. Things improved considerably when I moved into a new place for my final year and we had a much larger widescreen TV in the living room, but it was still 480i, still composite, and that was the best it ever got.

Of course, I occasionally saw games in their full HD glory. At the *Sega Rally 3* launch event, the console game was setup for comparison with its arcade counterpart – both 720p, the latter running at 60fps rather than 30fps. However, I'd most often get that experience on Xbox 360 demo units with their distinctive Samsung LCD TVs. The downloadable demo of *Mirror's Edge* looked striking when I played it at home, but I have a distinct memory of heading upstairs in Zavvi and seeing the game running on one of those pods, and finding myself mesmerised by the extra detail and clarity revealed by the intended display.

That was more or less how the story went for the rest of the generation – sometimes I'd have my tiny TVs, sometimes I'd have a bigger shared one. Even when I moved down to Bournemouth to start my job on this magazine, I was still using a 14-inch portable TV with built-in DVD player that you may have seen in some of our old photos. I didn't make the jump to HD until 2014, when the menus in *South Park: The Stick Of Truth* proved so completely unreadable on my portable CRT that I finally bought a full HD set that I still use today. Of course, by then the Xbox 360 was winding down, and the PlayStation 4 had become my primary modern console by the end of the year.

This month's cover feature presented some challenges, since a lot of the images supplied to the press back in the Xbox 360 days were what we call bullshots – screenshots that were typically not representative of what you see during gameplay, at resolutions sometimes in excess of 4K. Wanting to represent the system as accurately as possible, I got my old Xbox 360 out to grab my own screenshots, and set it up for 720p since that's the most common target resolution. I grabbed a bunch of personal favourite games and big hits from my shelves, got to work, and it dawned on me that it was my first time viewing many of them as they were intended to be seen.

BACKLOG BUSTING

THE XBOX 360 GAMES I'M LOOKING TO PLAY FOR THE FIRST TIME

JOHN WOO PRESENTS STRANGLEHOLD
This one fascinated me at the time, and it seems timely given the 4K Blu-Ray release of *Hard Boiled*.

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE FORGOTTEN SANDS
I finally cleared the 2008 *Prince Of Persia* from my backlog last year, so this one's next on the list.

SLEEPING DOGS
I've been meaning to get around to this one for over a decade – I got it before the PS4 remaster was released.

EL SHADDAI: ASCENSION OF THE METATRON
This is one of the most artistically distinctive games of its generation, and I did enjoy the downloadable demo.

SAINTS ROW: THE THIRD
This is a more recent pick-up – £3 for the complete version seemed like a pretty good deal to me.

I recently saw occasional **Retro Gamer** contributor Mike Diver say, "Videogames have never needed to look 'better' than they did on PS3 and 360," and while that comment was at least partially tongue in cheek, I can see what he means. There's no doubt that graphics have moved on – just compare *Tekken 6* to *Tekken 8* for proof – but I think it's fair to say that we've hit diminishing returns, as many of the Xbox 360 games I've been playing hardly look *bad* today. Maybe that's because I play a lot of Switch games too, but I think in many cases it's just the strength of the artistic vision overcoming technical limitations.

In any case, getting a fresh look at old favourites has heightened my appreciation for what developers achieved with the Xbox 360, and made me very enthusiastic about the console all over again. I want to finally try out some of the games that have been in my backlog for far too long. I want to go back to *Child Of Eden*, and this time play through it with Kinect. Heck, *Sonic Unleashed* is pretty enough that I might even replay that. Who would have thought that moving to 720p could inspire all that? ✱

HERE'S ONE OF THE MORE SWISH SETUPS I SHARED – AND YES, THAT'S MY AMSTRAD GX4000.
[XBOX 360] I'VE GOT A GOOD FEW XBOX 360 GAMES LEFT TO PLAY, AND SLEEPING DOGS IS ONE OF THEM.
Total Time
02'08"09
Lap Time
00'46"81
Best Lap Time
01'21"27
[XBOX 360] IT'S FAR EASIER TO APPRECIATE THE LITTLE DETAILS LIKE CHURNED-UP MUD IN SEGA RALLY IN HD.

THIS TV, AND OTHERS OF A SIMILAR SIZE, FACILITATED THE MAJORITY OF MY XBOX 360 GAMING.
[XBOX 360] I'M NOT SURE HOW MUCH I'LL GAIN FROM CHILD OF EDEN IN 720P, BUT I'M EXCITED TO FIND OUT.
[XBOX 360] I ALWAYS THOUGHT THE AURORA STAGE IN VIRTUA FIGHTER 5 LOOKED AWESOME, BUT OVER HDMI? WOW.
[XBOX 360] EVEN 2D GAMES BENEFIT FROM THE BUMP IN RESOLUTION – THE SPRITES IN BLAZBLUE: CALAMITY TRIGGER LOOK VERY NICE.
[XBOX 360] OF ALL THE GAMES TO PUSH ME INTO ADOPTING HD, I NEVER WOULD HAVE EXPECTED A SOUTH PARK TIE-IN.
[XBOX 360] IF IT WEREN'T FOR MOTION SICKNESS ISSUES, I'D BE REPLAYING MIRROR'S EDGE IN 720P RIGHT NOW.
Position
3/6
Lap
2/3
110 Mph

UPGRADE PATHS

Readers share their experiences with the upgrade to HDTV

Pedro Soares
When I bought my first PS3 (the fat 40GB model *Uncharted* bundle), I still had my tiny Sanyo CRT since the NES days, and hooked it up to that, playing quite some games up to *Metal Gear Solid 4* (before it even had Trophy support).

Simon Pike
It was part-way through the 360 era that I finally went HD. The first game I played on my new TV was *Mass Effect*, and I remember being blown away by how clear and vibrant the planets looked on the scanning screen. Before long it just felt normal again though...

Tufty McTavish
I used a 32-inch CRT telly for my Xbox 360 in 2006, but simply could not read text in *Oblivion*. So I took the entire Xbox 360 to a local audio/TV shop and plugged it into an HD plasma. My eyes bulged at the difference, so I bought one. I still use that same telly today in 2025, with the Xbox Series X.

Helder Silva
I got a 32-inch Vizio LCD that cost $750 at the time (I still own it) to be able to read the text in the game *Dead Rising*.

Pixel.Str337
I was all in on the HDTV hype when the 360 came out, and ended up getting a bargain on a low-latency 720p display model. It worked great with the new Xbox but it made my retro consoles look worse than they did on the CRT I'd foolishly dumped. I only realised why years later.

jeepsec
My 360 started life connected to a standard-def TV (so did the PS3 and Wii). About a year later I won a 37-inch HDTV in a raffle, and I remember being amazed at the difference. It was like getting cataracts removed and developing eagle vision all at the same time.

Mister Stu
I replaced my legendary 36-inch Toshiba CRT (36ZP38 Model) for a Samsung LCD in 2005. It cost £1,700 and was worse than the Toshiba in every way, 480p via component on the Tosh was way better than 720p on the Sammy.

MAILBAG

HAVE YOUR SAY... SEND US A LETTER OR MAKE YOURSELF HEARD ON SOCIAL MEDIA – **TWITTER.COM/RETROGAMER_MAG**

WIN!

Every month, one lucky writer-in will receive a copy of one of our classic retro books from our archives. Good luck everyone!

» Here's a picture of Ian's *Ocarina Of Time*, still with its price sticker on it.

ARE GAMES REALLY EXPENSIVE NOW?

Dear **Retro Gamer**,

I'm fascinated by the debate on the rising price of AAA games and totally understand people feeling challenged or ripped off by prices hitting £70. That said, I forked out 50 quid for *Ocarina Of Time* back in 1998 (£112 at current prices). I tend towards optimism, so I think the cost of games is less of a problem than the tedious shift towards virtual game cards and monthly passes that keep you locked in.

Keep up the good work,

Ian Darby

While you're absolutely right that games are still relatively cheap once inflation is considered, the cost of living feels far more of a factor now than it did then, Ian. We absolutely agree with you on Virtual Key Cards and monthly passes. As collectors, the former is something we don't like at all.

A FAN OF FAN TRANSLATIONS

Dear **Retro Gamer**,

I recently fell down the deep rabbit hole that is English fan translations for games that were never released in the West. I'm amazed at the amount of retro games that I can now play in English thanks to all the wonderful translators doing a fantastic job. My current favourite is *Boku no Natsuyasumi 2* on the PlayStation 2 – shout out to Hilltop Works for the English patch! I'd love to see an interview with them, or a feature on the latest English translations.

Keep up the good work.

Bryan Summers

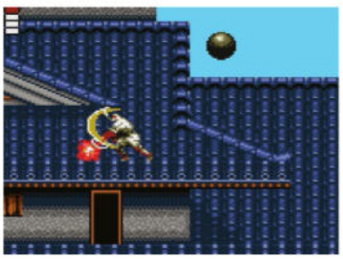
You're not the only one enjoying fan translations, Bryan. Nick has been streaming a playthrough of the first *Sakura Wars*, which is now available in English. If you fancy seeing what it's like, you'll find his channel at twitch.tv/hkt3030

» [Saturn] Nick has spent the last couple of months playing through the English translation of *Sakura Wars* on his Saturn.

NINJAS ARE GOOD, NINJAS ARE BAD

Hi **Retro Gamer**,

In your Guide to the Game Gear in **RG** 273, you called *Shinobi II: The Silent Fury* one of the system's very best games, possibly the best. I agree with that… for the first half of the game. Rescuing the different-coloured ninjas and discovering how to use their powers and weapons is super fun. It's reasonably challenging and very rewarding. But the game takes a complete nose-dive at the Enemy's Base stage after you have all the ninjas! Calling it a single stage is a misnomer; there are tons of screens and activities there, rife with brutally difficult platforming tasks that require you to have absolutely mastered all of the ninjas' special movement abilities. All this while being miserly with extra lives. I know this is how games at the time would pad out their playtime, but come on! Still, I'll always have a soft spot for it because of the first half, the colourful ninjas, and the music. Every Saturday my wife and I park ourselves at the bar at



» [Game Gear] Yes it's hard, but *Shinobi II: The Silent Fury* remains a cracking edition to the series.

STAR LETTER

NEW SYSTEMS ARE RETRO TOO

Dear **Retro Gamer**,

Many thanks for such a great magazine, I'm relatively young (mid-30s) so I find reading about systems that came out in the Eighties and Nineties to be fascinating. I'm lucky that my dad has always been into his games, so I got to play some of these systems and games when I was younger and can appreciate them in a way other people my age might not. Having said that, I do hope that we can start seeing more modern-ish stuff in the magazine. The PSP was the first console I was able to buy with my own money (a combination of birthday and pocket money) and it was fantastic seeing it on the cover a few months back. I loved playing games like *Lumines*, *Patapon* and *Monster Hunter Freedom Unite*. The PlayStation 3 (one of my favourite consoles) is going to be 20 years old next year and would make for a fantastic cover. I know many won't consider it retro, but my friends and I do as we played on it as kids.

Keep up the great work.

James Peters

» [PSP] *Monster Hunter Freedom Unite* was a huge game on the PSP and James was a big fan of it.

Thanks for writing in, James. While the magazine will always be focussed on the Seventies, Eighties and Nineties, we're well aware that younger gamers enjoy the magazine as well, which is why we put both the PSP and the DS on the cover recently. We can certainly consider a PS3 cover for next year, it will just come down to what sort of access we can get. Treat yourself to a book while you wait.

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a local brunch spot, and I always bring **Retro Gamer** with me to read. Keep up the excellent work.
Erik Kelly,
Irvine, CA

» Richard Peck was delighted to see the *Resident Evil 2* demo featured in Covermount Corner. Write in if you have your own request.

It's a shame you didn't click with the second half of the game, Erik. We still feel it's one of the system's best games, but do agree that increased difficulty was often used to pad out a game's run time.

COVERMOUNT DELIGHT

Hi **Retro Gamer**,
I started reading this month's issue and I got to Covermount Corner and what did I see? Only issue 31 of *OPM*! Thank you so much, it was an absolute delight to read and brought back so many fond memories. Like I said in my previous email, this disc made me a huge fan of *Resident Evil* and *Dynasty Warriors*, so thank you again.

Also, have you ever done a feature on fan-made videogame zines? Like the ones that used to be shown in the *CVG* magazine supplement back in the day? I used to love looking at them and seeing what people created. Loving the mag as always, thank you again.
Richard Peck

We're glad you enjoyed the Covermount Corner, Richard. As for fanzines, it's not something we're really delved into, but we can certainly try putting something together.

MAGAZINE CRAFT
STEVE JARRATT
Whether it was in the Newsfield office in Ludlow or Future Publishing in Bath, Steve Jarratt spent years reporting on the gaming scene as it went through its most dramatic changes. We join him to look back on a career that includes many beloved and enduring titles, from Zzap!64 and Commodore Format, to Edge and the Official UK PlayStation Magazine
THEN
NOW
ACE
MEMORABLE MAG COVER
Commodore

» The interview with Steve Jarratt proved to be very popular with readers like John.

A LIVING LEGEND

Hi **Retro Gamer**,
I was delighted to read your interview with the great Steve Jarratt in issue 278. His work on *Zzap!64*, *Edge*, *ACE* and various Bitmap Books (all kindly sourced by the golden boy of magazine sales Marc Jowett) mirrors my own reading habits over the years. What a legend Steve was! (Along with yourselves of course.) Keep up the great work.
Regards,
John Ebbs, Dublin

We're glad you enjoyed the interview, John. It's been a very popular one, which isn't surprising when you consider Steve's impressive body of work.

Your say

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

What's your favourite Xbox Live Arcade game?

» [Xbox One] *Shadow Complex* was a great Xbox 360 game and now has a remastered version.

Steven Hall
Peggle. I was obsessed with hitting those little pegs with the little ball. I think I was desperate for approval from the Unicorn!

FatPlumber
It's either one of the *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved* games or *OutRun Online Arcade*. Both are tremendous to play and insanely addictive. Some of the best games on the hugely missed service.

PhorV
I really liked the side-scrolling *Shadow Complex*. The 2.5D world, satisfying combat, and tons of secrets still hold up today, and the game's Foam Gun is still one of the best Metroidvania power-ups.

FixItFire
Castle Crashers. One of the best co-op couch games out there. Me and my wife played it for days, it was addictive and fun and we wanted to unlock everything!

Bill Coniglio
While it was only a beta, *1 Vs 100*. I had so much fun with that during the test and always wanted them to bring it back.

Armakuni
Braid. It's still one of the most unique and clever platformers out there. And the story seems standard but takes a serious twist. A very original game!

Tufty McTavish
Marble Blast Ultra! I spent many an hour trying to shave off fractions of a second from my level times, all while competing with pals on the XBLA leaderboards.

RadioTales
After Burner: Climax. It had impressive graphics, a great soundtrack and you can fly an F-14 Tomcat! It's a shame it hasn't been re-released. Good times!

Ken Harrison
Lumines Live!. Released right before *Lumines 2* on the PSP and a lot of skins appeared on both games. I can't wait for *Lumines Arise*.

Jason
Sensible World Of Soccer. The best football game ever with nicer graphics but the same incredible gameplay. It's everything I could have wanted.

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

The Christmas Issue

Being the busy little squirrels that we are, the team has already started work on the issue you'll be reading in January (we'll be working on it right up to the Christmas break). We've got some wonderful articles planned for it already, including one of the greatest PlayStation 2 games of all time. But will you be able to guess what it is before the issue is out?

» [PlayStation 2] Is *God Of War II* our cover game? You'll have to wait and see.

retro GAMER

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COVER IMAGE
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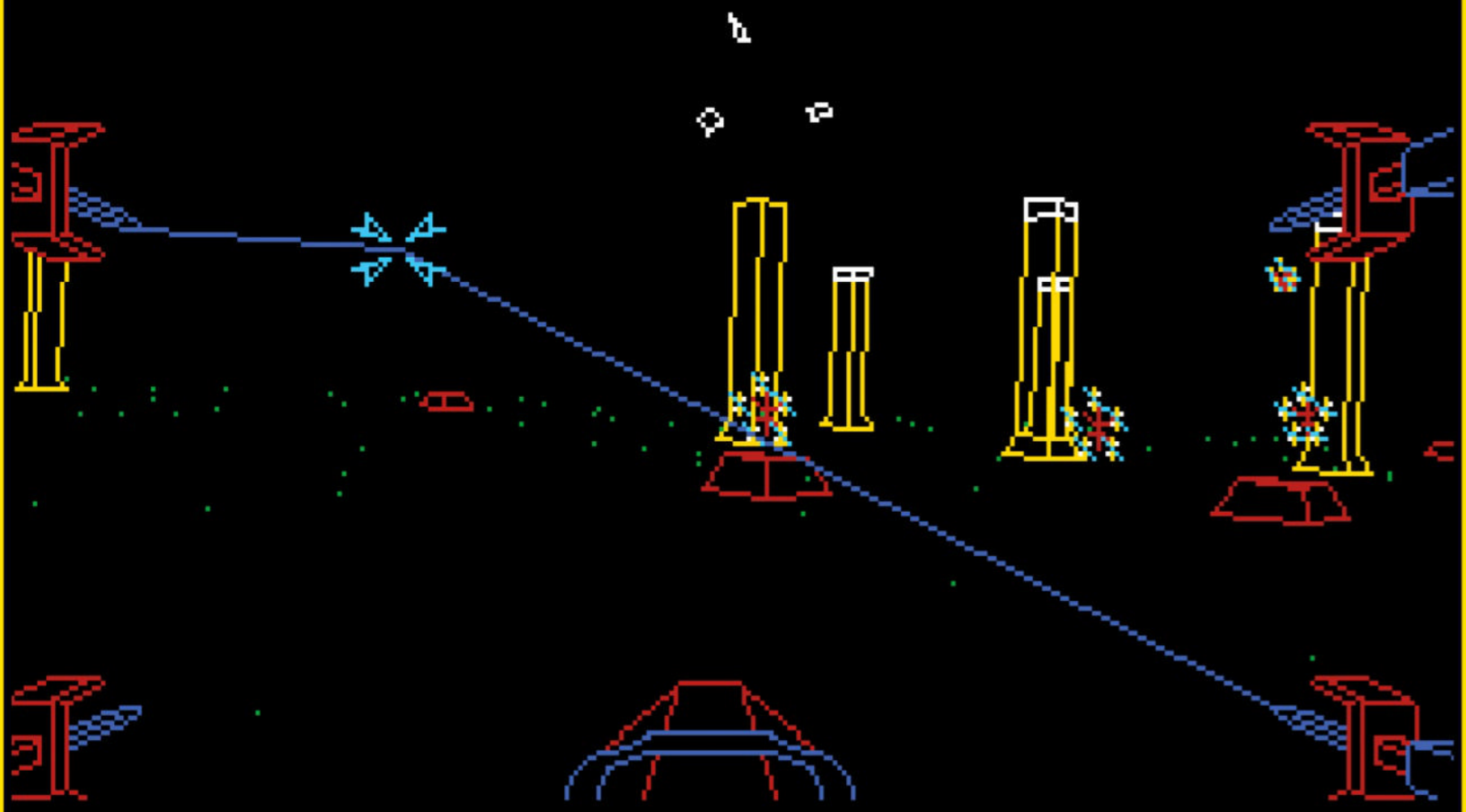

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The Lord Of The Rings: The Third Age

NOW WITH ADDED ACHIEVEMENTS

» RETROREVIVAL

» PLAYSTATION 2 » 2004
» EA REDWOOD SHORES

My first encounter with *The Third Age* was when I reviewed the Xbox version, either for *games™* or *XBM* a long, long time ago. Even though it's blatantly a rip-off of Square's *Final Fantasy* games, I certainly enjoyed *The Third Age* for what it was, so I have always had a copy of it in my collection.

Created by EA Redwood Shores, *The Third Age* is a grandiose adventure that, rather than letting you control The Fellowship Of The Ring, instead focusses on a group of other, no less capable adventurers led by Berethor, a captain of Gondor's Citadel Guard, who is travelling to Rivendell to seek out Boromir. He soon teams up with a number of other heroes and their quest runs parallel with the events of the film. In fact, it even takes a few liberties at times; at one point they team up with Gandalf to battle the Balrog and later face off against Grima Wormtongue.

The Third Age is essentially a retelling of Jackson's trilogy, featuring many of the story beats from the films and peppering the game with a large amount of video footage culled from the popular saga. These videos feature Sir Ian McKellen's Gandalf relaying information to Berethor, fleshing out the game's fairly pedestrian story in a surprisingly engaging way.

In terms of mechanics, *The Third Age* is a typical turn-based RPG. Each character has numerous weapon and class abilities that slowly unlock new skills as they are used and many are activated by spending Action Points. Over the course of time Perfect Mode can be utilised that allows for even more devastating attacks, from launching a volley of arrows to summoning a guardian Ent. You'll be handily warned when important story battles are due to take place and there's a large amount of equipment and items to discover.

So what's made me return to *The Third Age*? Simple, the use of Achievements on my Steam Deck via the RetroAchievements widget. With the core game taking a good 30-odd hours to complete, I liked the idea of getting a little extra reward while playing. Also, that smaller screen makes those heavily compressed film excerpts a lot easier on the eyes than they were on the systems of the time.

ENDGAME

THE ADVENTURES OF BATMAN & ROBIN
(MEGA-CD, 1995)

» Remember when Batman Returns came out on the Mega-CD, and added combat racing to a duff platformer? Clockwork Tortoise sure did, because the team took a second crack at the good racing bits with the animated series as the new source material and added exclusive animated cutscenes.

01

» Clayface is in a spot of bother – he's been attempting to escape to Gotham in a chopper, but Batman has severely damaged the vehicle. As you can see, he's pretty upset about it.

02

» The helicopter is out of control and slams into the side of a bridge – an impact sufficient to kill a man, and cause months of traffic disruption due to the repair work required.

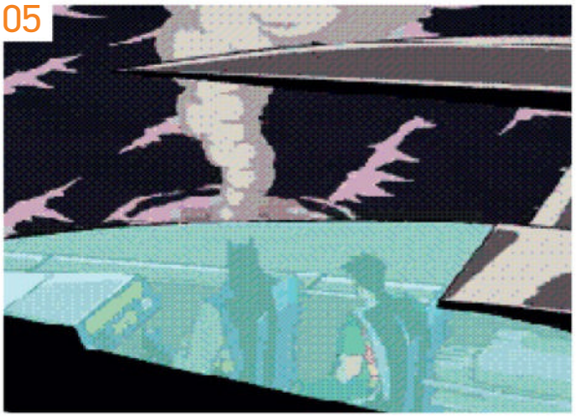
03

» But wait! Clayface is still alive. He is admittedly not in the best shape, being on fire and all, but he's plummeting towards the river so he might be fine. He's survived so far, right?

04

» Never mind. Plunging into the murky waters does stop the fire, but it doesn't do Clayface any good as he quickly begins to disintegrate. Unfortunately, he doesn't think quickly enough to do a *Wizard Of Oz* bit and shout, "I'm melting!" We'll forgive him, since he's busy falling to pieces.

05



» Robin looks into the water. "Batman... did we just kill that guy?" The caped crusader replies sternly. "No, Robin. The water killed him." The sidekick goes to object, but quickly reconsiders when Batman indicates that he'll happily throw Robin in the river. Silly Robin, you won't disintegrate.

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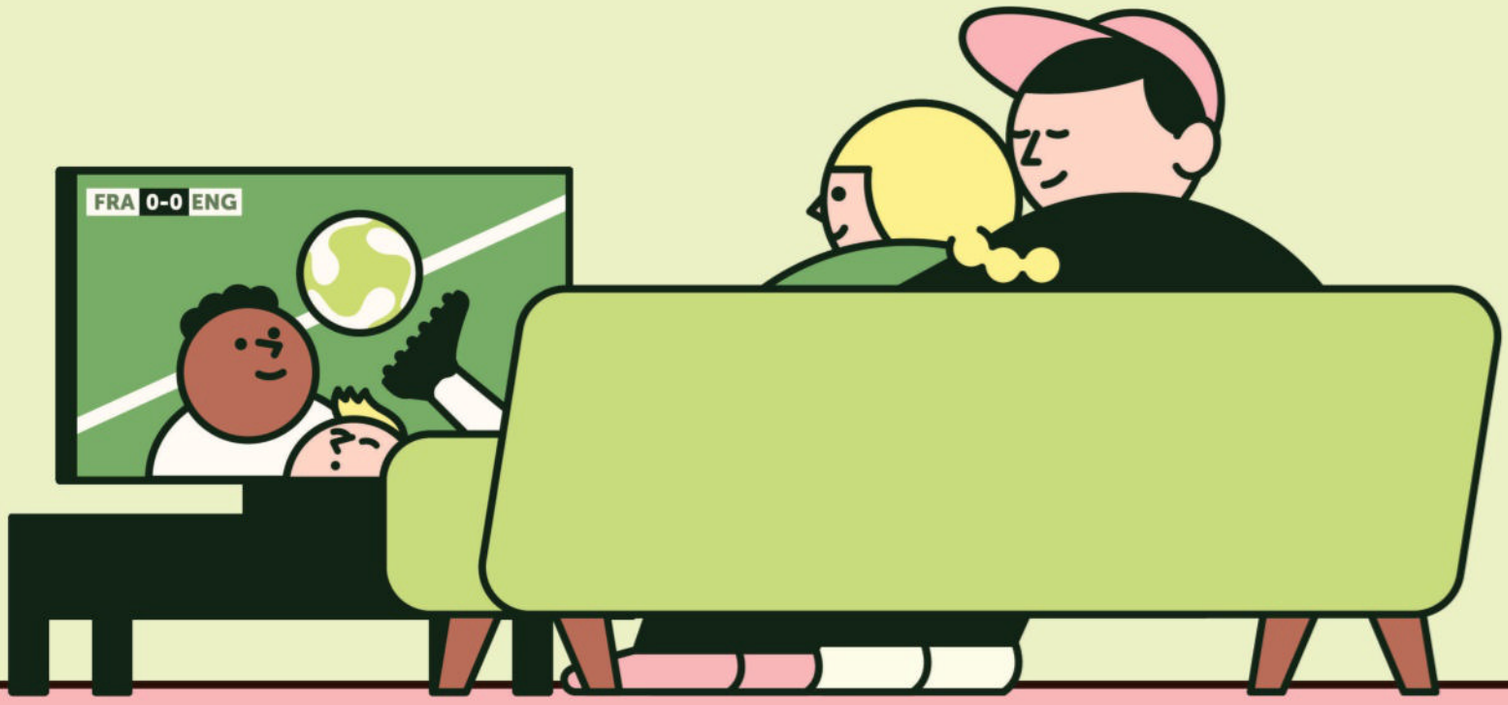

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